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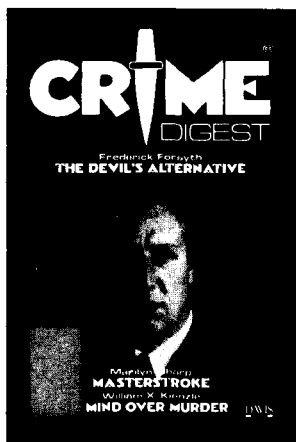
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VOLUME 27, NO. 1 JANUARY 6, 1982

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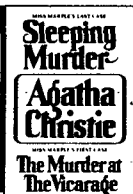
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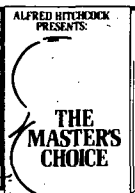
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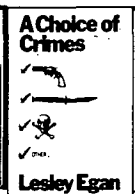
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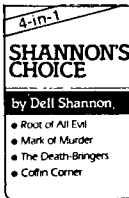
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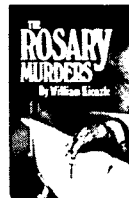
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January 6, 1982

Dear Reader:

"Between the dark and the daylight/When the night is beginning to lower/Comes a pause in the day's occupations/That is known as the Children's Hour." But are you ready for the children you will meet in this new issue? They are a spoiled and desperate lot—the brothers in Jeffrey Scott's "Better Than Money," the sons in Carol Myers Martin's "Not a Whipperwill Called" and Robert Twohy's "Coincidence," the daughter in Ron Butler's "The Willow Woman"—and the sad little girl in Edward D. Hoch's "The Unicorn's Daughter." As Kahlil Gibran reminded parents: "You are the bows from which your children as living arrows are sent forth."

But none of us is too old to enjoy the fine art of storytelling, however lowering the night.

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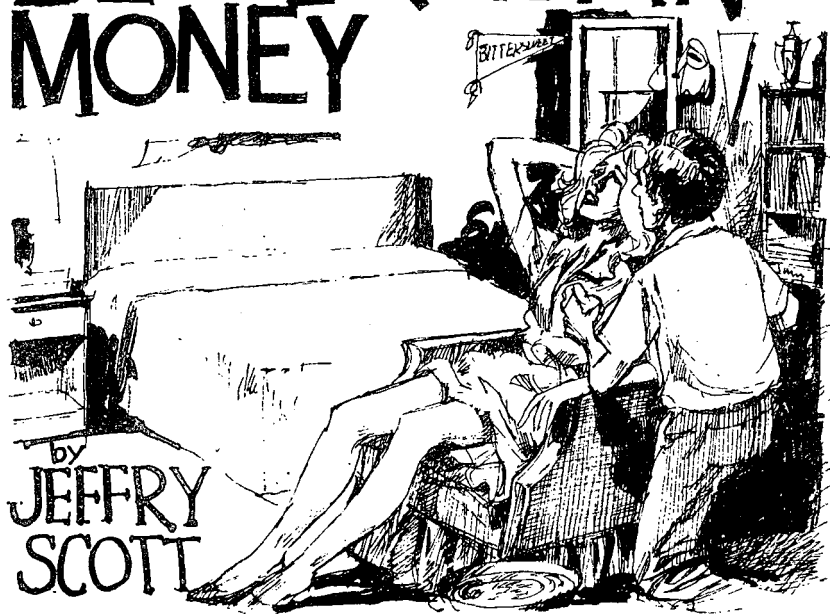
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Hal needed to get out of the U.S., but he didn't want Mexico . . .

BETTER THAN MONEY



Lynda's ruined haystack of brittle hair was tickling Walt Cannard's wrist and another few inches would put them cheek to cheek, but it wasn't a romantic moment. Time, place, and people were wrong. "Head back," he repeated patiently, "your nose is bleeding."

She tried to speak, whimpering at the pain of her swollen lips. A fuzzy centipede seemed to be crawling into her left eye, where the false lashes had peeled away. Snuffling, gasping, she subsided in the old armchair.

Walt squeezed the washcloth, absently noting the water in the bowl turning pink. He squeezed Lynda's plump shoulder. "Couple of days, you'll never know it happened," he lied. If he told her of the broken front tooth she'd have hysterics. What a mess, he thought, without great emotion. Another Hal Cannard mess.

"This may hurt, so be a brave girl," he soothed. "Ice pack to bring the swelling down. I used to help coach the boxing team in school—I know what I'm doing." The assurance was needless. Poor Lynda was one of life's order-takers.

Making her prey for Hal, of course. Walt Cannard's brother had a feral instinct for such people. Lynda was new in town—but only in this town, Bittersweet. Walt, with a surprisingly old head on his twenty-five-year-old shoulders, suspected that Lynda's progress could be summed up as endless fresh starts in strange places.

She wasn't a hooker exactly, but she rarely paid for her own food and drinks. Given a kiss-off present at the end of a relationship—when a man's wife came back from vacation or a bachelor found something better—she'd be prettily surprised and uncertain whether to be offended or grateful, but she wouldn't argue. Lynda said she was a model, and believed it, but the photographs in her cherished portfolio showed clothes nearly a decade out of date.

Shock and the returning grip of booze had sent her into a doze. Walt Cannard dumped the tainted water, rinsed the washcloth, arranged and put away the tin box of first-aid oddments.

Sitting on the edge of the bed, he studied Lynda. Well, the nose wasn't broken and the bruises were ephemeral. Either she'd have to cultivate a Mona Lisa smile or come up with eight hundred dollars' worth of dentistry though. Hal's chunky ring, worn for the purpose. For a basically stupid man, Hal had a genius for making pain last, if only in the memory.

Lynda's skirt had ridden up and a heavy breast threatened to loll out of her ripped satin shirt, but Walt Cannard's inspection held no trace of desire. He thought she looked a little like Coral—less class and a heavier figure, but something in the eyes and the pathetically self-conscious gaiety. He wondered where Coral was these days and, knowing she probably looked and acted exactly like poor Lynda, he shook his head and cursed softly.

Chopping the speculation short, he made himself look around the room,

a corner of his mind registering Hal's snoring from downstairs in the living room.

Walt's bedroom was the cleanest and tidiest area of the house, a hold-over from better times when Ma and Pa Cannard were alive and Hal was away in the service where, with luck and possibly blasphemous prayer, he might get killed or gravely disabled. A broken .22 rifle was on pegs over the bed, the bookcase showed ranks of aviation and popular-science magazines, and a catcher's mitt, leather starting to perish, was impaled above the mirror with some old high-school pennons. Hal Cannard, vaguely affronted by the orderliness, jeered at his brother as a retard.

Maybe I am, thought Walt. That's better than being an animal.

With a small shock, he found himself looking into Lynda's eyes. "He tried to kill me," she mumbled. Her eyes rolled and she made to rise. "He wanted me dead."

Walt shook his head, almost grinning. Hal usually got what he wanted. If he'd wanted to kill Lynda, she'd know it—or rather, she wouldn't know anything, any more. Hal was just a mean drunk maddened by the fact that while he despised women he couldn't do without their company.

The idea hit him with sickening suddenness. Seeing him go white, Lynda started snivelling. Walt gripped her arm fiercely. "It's O.K., he passed out. That's how I rescued you."

Mouth clownish, detached eyelash wriggling, Lynda whined, "You're a good kid. But get me out, huh?"

"Yeah. I'll drive you home. Where's your stuff?"

"The other bedroom. Just my portfolio, and the little case—the blue one, honey. He bought me a dress but I don't want it, it's tainted!" Close to enjoying herself, she clasped Walt's hand. "I huh-haven't got a home, anywhere to go—"

No, Walt pondered, his deceptively boyish face unreadable, she didn't. She had been at the Holiday Inn for a couple of days, then she'd roomed with Mrs. Abel down near the canning plant, and for the past week she'd been Hal Cannard's live-in woman.

He padded back with the battered suitcase and giant folder of photographs. "You can't stay here, Lynda. I don't know what you did to him, but while you were sleeping, I had to threaten him with the gun to keep him from coming up here."

Lynda wailed, "Nothing, I didn't do anything. He needled and needled, you know how Hal is when he's drinking. Then he hit me." She was

trembling so much Walt finally had to half carry her down to his car, returning for her luggage.

"We'll drive around," he said. Lynda, blearily fiddling with the radio to find music, nodded. Walt drove carefully. It was a hundred-mile ride but the airport didn't open until 8:30 A.M. and the sky was only just beginning to pale.

"What'll you do now?"

Lynda shrugged, yelped, bit her lip, encountered fresh pain, and burst into tears.

Walt let her cry herself out.

"I ought to tell the cops," she gulped. "Got a cigarette, honey?" He passed her one, and lit it, never taking his eyes off the road.

He spoke carefully. "I can turn around, Lynda. Sheriff Tully wouldn't take kindly to being woken, so we could find a diner, wait until nine or so, then go see him. I agree Hal needs a lesson. But he's kin, I couldn't testify against my own brother."

Not for the sake of a fine, he added mentally. It'd need to be something better than money.

"So it'd be your word against Hal's. And Bittersweet's a funny place, old-fashioned. A girl meets a guy and takes up with him after one date? They might think—" He let it trail away.

"Jerkwater town," Lynda muttered spitefully. "I'm never going back, Walt. I don't care who asks me, I just flat-out refuse to go back!" He blinked, mildly amused at the way she'd taken his warning and twisted it around to make her own surrender tolerable.

"Where'd you like to be, Lynda? Where would you like to be headed?"

Sucking at the cigarette, she gazed out at the grey-green-silver dustiness of the desert unrolling in measured waves as Walt stuck to 55 m.p.h. "I don't care. Somewhere *green*. L.A.—I've always loved L.A."

Walt could afford that. He was glad she hadn't said London or Paris. He'd taken a package tour to both the previous year. It was fulfilling a promise made to Coral—except that she hadn't been with him. The car jumped forward. Lynda cried out and grabbed at the dash. Walt made himself crane up at the rearview mirror so she'd see the move.

"I thought a car was following. No, it's turned off. Once Hal gets a thing in his mind—" Walt had no compunction about playing Lynda like a musical instrument. "He's done time for manslaughter."

Lynda was silent for the next fifty miles. Walt pulled in at a diner and fed her juice and lukewarm mushroom soup. She went away for half an hour, and the transformation amazed him. Her hair was back in its complex whorls and waves, the human Barbie Doll mask was flawless, and she'd changed into narrow legged jeans and a crisp white blouse.

"That bastard," she said. Close to, he could see the bruised cheek and, as he'd predicted, her lips were primly tight over the ugly gap in her front teeth.

On the blacktop again, Walt smiled cheerily. "Los Angeles, here you come. Be there by midday. The airport's only twenty-five miles off. A feeder line takes you to Gayleigh, then the flight's direct."

Lynda colored and wriggled. "I like the idea, but—"

He passed her the white envelope.

She opened it and counted. "Two hundred dollars!"

"I wish it was more," he said, sincerely—though not for the sake of giving her extra. Hal Cannard believed his kid brother good only for two things—working hard and making money—and felt it was his duty and right to spend as much of it as Walt failed to hide or argue out of grabbing reach.

"I can't take this from you, honey," she said. But the envelope was poised in the jaws of her purse. He was pleased that her lips were damaged—he didn't want her kisses, even sisterly ones on the cheek. Coral had kissed him, and more, then she'd gone away to have Hal's baby and never returned.

He waited at the airport, no more than a giant tarmac X with control tower and single-story depot, until Lynda's plane took off. He felt certain she wouldn't linger, far less go back to Bittersweet and a man she believed intent on killing her. But Walt was a compulsive snipper of loose ends, prone to make sure and then check that he hadn't been mistaken.

"You're a really good human being," Lynda had gushed before scurrying to join the line of passengers going out to the plane. She'd always been a rotten judge of character.

Ever since he could remember, Walt Cannard had ached to murder his brother. In childhood he hadn't thought of it as murder, simply the smashing and blotting out of a monster. Maturity taught him the correct

label, and the risks. Murder, he learned from true-crime magazines, was a family matter. The police always suspected victims' relatives.

That was checkmate, as far as Walt could see, since he and Hal were orphans with no living kinfolk left. But the urge and hunger built with the gradual, unstoppable progress of a stalagmite in a blind cavern. After what happened with Coral, no slow geological metaphor was suitable. It was as if a malignant disease, present though dormant from earliest years, had suddenly sent evil filaments to his heart and brain and nerves and every pore of his body. He had to kill Hal. And he was determined not to be punished for it.

Accidents diverted him for a while. The car slipping off a sloppily homed jack, a radio knocked into the bath. But Hal was too idle to service his pickup truck and there was no power socket in the bathroom. No, it would have to be an outright attack. A bullet in the back. Hal and Walt were the same size and build. Walt was ten years younger, but Hal was a born brawler and had to win any hand-to-hand encounter.

To a man like Walt, needing to be sure of everything in advance, the problem was agonizing. On the credit side, Hal was a notorious black-sheep, one of Bittersweet's rare losers and wasters, no stranger to Sheriff Tully's drunk tank nor to Judge Anderson's bench, where he'd been fined for petty thievery, handling stolen goods, and indecent exposure. Most significant, he was a fitful parasite on Walt and the family. Every so often he took off on benders into the next state, and for one blissful summer he went to Florida and lost either his memory or his money, or both.

So the chances were that if he disappeared forever Bittersweet would say good riddance to bad rubbish. But for Walt Cannard, counting on that chance was intolerable. He knew his limitations and that his main limitation was lack of imagination. Suppose he got it wrong? Suppose, within days or weeks of killing Hal, Sheriff Tully came visiting, demanding to know what had happened to his brother? Suppose one of Hal's women reported him missing and insisted on an investigation?

The endless suppositions made Walt sweat and kept his brother alive. What was needed, Walt daydreamed, was a dress rehearsal, a dummy run. If only Hal could be murdered but *not* murdered, ready to bring back to life if things went sour.

When Hal punched Lynda in the face, the curtain rose on that rehearsal.

Hal Cannard tried to roll over and fell off the couch in a tangle of

frowsty blanket.

He saw, without noticing it, that the ratty cigarette-scorched rug was missing, leaving a pale square on the woodblock floor.

His stomach rebelled at the tang of disinfectant and—hell, wet paint. “Kid, kid!” he bellowed, sobbing at the throb it caused between his ears.

“I’m here,” said Walt, emerging from the floor behind the couch holding a scrubbing brush, his hands wrinkled from long immersion in water.

“I need coffee. Something crawled into my mouth and died during the night. Put a slug of brandy in with the coffee, and don’t be stingy.” Hal stabbed a shaky finger at his brother. “And don’t give me the oyster eyes and the long face!”

“I’ll get your coffee.”

Hal struggled back onto the couch. He made sandpaper noises, dry-washing his face. Some men savor hangovers, taking warped pride in them. “I’ve lost the will to live,” he announced with relish. When Walt brought it, he slurped the coffee straight down, shuddered, and tossed the empty mug back to Walt.

His mood changed abruptly. “I had a hell of a nightmare. It kept coming back all night.

“About her, whatever her name is.”

“Lynda.” Walt’s voice held a whiplash.

“Yeah, her. Hell of a dream. Me hitting her, maybe too hard. Just a slap to show her the way of the world, know what I mean? She fell bad.” He glared at Walt. “You kept telling me I’d killed her. In the dream. I know what goes on when I’m crocked, kid. You think I forget the stuff you whisper. I’ve seen you, the way you look at me—like I was dirt, like you’d love to kill me.”

Walt sat down, the damp brush in his hand. “That’s crazy, Hal. Families stick together.”

Hal made a hawking noise. “What’s that stink?”

“The rug. It wouldn’t wash off. I’m burning it out back.”

Pondering the riddle, Hal gave up and lay back with a curse. “Sunday, kid. It’s supposed to be a day of rest, right? Why clean house? Want to make me feel bad? It won’t work. Pa left the house between us, even-steven. I’ll live the way I choose.”

Walt, hands clenched around the brush, spoke sharply. “Wake up!”

“Leave me alone.”

"It wasn't a nightmare, Hal," Walt said flatly. "You finally did it, Hal. She's dead. You killed Lynda."

Every morning, once he'd unlocked the store and switched off the burglar alarm, Walt Cannard strode to the cash register. Out would come his Parker pen with a flourish as he cancelled the previous day's date on the calender taped to the machine.

The crossouts confirmed that Hal had been hiding in the Shield Lake cabin for nearly a week. Time enough for the alarm to be raised, or at least mild curiosity expressed, over his abrupt departure. But it hadn't happened.

After four days, Walt wandered into Nick's Home Decor, the store opposite his own, and started browsing through wallpaper samples. "Hal's taken off for Florida again," he explained. "Maybe I'll decorate the place while he's away. Give him a nice surprise when all that sun and sand palls on him and he comes home."

Albert Nickson smiled maliciously. "If you want to please Hal better build a bar in his bedroom and another in the john. If you had any sense you'd get somebody in to mind the store and have your own vacation."

"Oh, Hal's O.K. He's just never settled down right since he was in the service," said Walt. Nobody suspected his true feelings about his brother, and he worked hard and cunningly to preserve the false impression.

"He's a pest," Nickson contradicted. But then curly Al Nickson, prematurely bald, had a pretty young wife. "Well, at least your profits will go up now that Hal's two thousand miles from the cash register."

Back in his own store, two girls dropped by, wasting time on token purchases, probably hoping to catch sight of Hal. And Carina Martin, a haggard widow with a tic in her eyelid giving her a flirty wink, came asking for him. Carina had a dairy farm near Bittersweet. Walt hadn't numbered her among his brother's string, but she was female and unprotected, so it made sense. He repeated his tale of Florida, throwing in Tampa and the offer of prospects with a friend there. "A woman friend," Carina spat, winking furiously and chewing some invisible cud of grievance. "Tell him—oh, forget it. You're not responsible for him. It'll be on his own head is all I can say."

That apart, it seemed evident that nobody in Bittersweet gave a damn whether Hal Cannard lived or died, operated in Tampa, Florida or in Hades.

When there were nine crosses on the calender, Walt drove out to Shield Lake, after dark. He'd bought the cabin with a twenty-first-birthday legacy as an investment after hearing talk that a West Coast combine meant to develop new ski resorts along the Sawtooth range. He'd snapped the place up for little more than the back taxes, intending to sell it again as a fishing lodge once the area boomed. A deepening recession had stopped all that, but it was still a wonderful investment.

Walt laughed explosively and was so excited he had to wipe his chin. Few people realized the cabin was there, in among the firs and spruce beside a black triangle of icy mountain spring water in a fold of the Sawtooths. Fewer yet knew that he owned it.

How grateful Hal had been that Sunday morning. His booze-sodden memory was yielding him just enough data to accept Walt's story. He'd yelled threats then suddenly broken down and wept, clutching Walt and pleading for help and support; failing that, silence and a few hours' start before Walt went running for the sheriff.

"Pull yourself together," Walt had suggested coldly. "You're disgusting." He'd never been able to use such words, that tone, without retaliation. Now Hal nodded ingratiatingly.

"I've started fixing things, while you were busy sleeping and dribbling on the cushions. So I'm in it up to my neck—that should tickle you."

Hal made a shapeless gesture. "Listen, I need some money and your car is all. My truck's no good."

"Sit still and listen. I've cleaned all the blood off and destroyed what can't be washed." Walt ticked points on his fingers. "I've painted that bit of wall by the fireplace, where—her head hit."

"They won't find the body for a week or so. I put her in the trunk, took her out to the highway. She's in one of the culverts."

"Hey, you really came through, kid," Hal said. "I never thought you—"

"You never think, period. I'm buying us time. But the folks over the way heard the ruckus. The old guy was here at two A.M. in his dressing gown, pounding the door. I panicked, if you must know. When their lights went back out over there I just got her the hell out of here."

"Ruckus," Hal repeated hollowly. He ground his palms around his eyesockets. "I can't remember it straight. It—there was plenty noise?"

"You could say. She screamed some, and you were yelling. If I'd woken

one minute sooner I might have stopped it getting so bad. Then again maybe you'd have wiped me out too."

Hal peered at him through his stubby fingers. "I'd never hurt you, kid. Hell, I love you, you're my damn brother." Walt thought, He means it, the fool.

"Running scared is the worst thing you could do," he said. "If she isn't found inside a month the rats and coyotes may have messed her up so she can't be identified. But if she *is* identified it's public knowledge she moved in with you. I've got the cabin. We'll go there tonight. You crouch down in the back of the car until we're clear of town. If anyone asks, I can say you're on a short vacation. If they find the body and nothing comes of it you just take up your life where it left off.

"If Sheriff Tully comes asking questions, I'll get word to you. You'll be safe at the cabin either way. You can sneak over into Mexico if you have to."

Hal's lower lip protruded thoughtfully, rebelliously. "Shield Lake, on my own?"

"You'll be fine. I'll provision-up at the store before we go. Plenty of food, beer, cigarettes. We'd better make a list."

Hal went along with it. Walt convinced him his only other choices were bad ones.

Walt waited in the car, lights out, until his eyes adjusted to the darkness before hiking the last mile and a half to the cabin. It seemed semi-derelict and deserted, but the door opened fast when he tapped. Hal had thumb-tacked blankets to every window and was working by the brilliance of a single candle.

"The radio doesn't work" were his opening words.

"Maybe it's the batteries," Walt said, knowing it was. "I brought fresh ones. And cigarettes, some more canned things, fancy stuff. And some bread mix, you just add water." There was a camping stove to cook on.

Hal grabbed the batteries and fumbled them into the plastic box. Tinny rock music blared and he turned it to a murmur, nearly dropping the radio. Walt, relishing his nervousness, turned the screws.

"You didn't miss much. The news is bad, Hal. They found the body six days ago. Dumb luck. A rainstorm carried some branches down, they jammed around the body, and there was a flood. A construction crew found her."

"Hell." Hal's bandit moustache was fuzzing out to join his sideburns in a messy beard. Now his open mouth made a dark hole of dismay and fear. "What's Tully doing?"

Walt stifled the temptation to invent a visit from Sheriff Tully. He didn't trust himself to describe a convincing scene. I must be a one-lie man, he reflected sardonically. Lynda saying that about Hal wanting her dead, it could have been true if she'd fallen wrong. I could see the way that could go.

"I'm not sure. It seemed risky to ask. They can't know who she is yet or Tully would have gone from the Holiday Inn to her rooming house to you."

Hal grunted, gnawing his thumbnail. The candlelight revealed that his fingertips were ragged crescents, raw-red in places. "I can't take it much longer, being cooped up here."

Walt thought of a Spanish saying: Patience, fleas, the night is long.

He could do it now. The gun was in his pocket, a .32 kit-gun Pa carried on camping trips when Walt was a boy. Make an excuse to walk behind Hal, put the muzzle too close to miss. In the lean-to behind the cabin was a rusty old tractor wheel and a length of chain. Hal would stand upright at the bottom of Shield Lake until his bones collapsed in a pile on top of the metal anchors.

With a flash of excitement and a sense of arrogance, he realized he was profoundly reluctant to kill Hal. It had nothing to do with cowardice and was a million miles removed from mercy. It was just that the past days had been the most exhilarating and sharply experienced of his life. This was how a cat must feel with a mouse between its paws. Or a sniper, sights faultlessly calibrated, with his victim sitting in the notch. It was thrilling.

Hal was talking. "I've been thinking about Mexico, Walt."

"It's the only thing I can come up with."

"What the hell would I do in Mexico?" Hal said.

What you've always done here, Walt thought. Lie and steal and cheat and work on your amateur status as pimp. He frowned and leaned forward, projecting intelligent interest.

"We need to buy a passport," Hal said. "If I can get to Europe, it might be O.K. I could operate in Europe. They do the stuff we do, Walt—blue movies, smoking grass. I could get myself an old lady and do all right."

Fairyland, thought Walt, Fantasy City. "I wouldn't know how to buy a fake passport, Hal. Or how go about looking for one even."

"There must be ways. They do it on TV all the time. Harbor places are best." Hal let the subject drop, restlessly taking up another. "Was it easy, sneaking up here?"

"Pretty simple. I drove around a while just in case. Outside town after dark one car looks pretty much like another." Walt stopped suddenly, concerned. "Listen, don't blow it now. For all I know they've identified Lynda and they're keeping quiet in the hope you'll break cover."

"But if I was real careful—"

"Promise me you'll give it another week. Then we'll talk it through and do the best thing." Laughter bubbled in his throat. Hal had better agree or one of them would be dead within minutes.

"O.K., a week." Hal made a feeble try at comradeship, slapping his brother's arm. "You're ace, kid, I won't let you down."

"I know that," Walt said. "I've had a real special feeling about you all week."

Hal's eyes slid away, his eyes moist. They sparkled from the candle flame, Walt noted with glee.

Two days later Walt inked another cross on the calendar, wishing he could slow time, and, turning casually, he saw khaki pants and shirt with a leather belt and chocolate facings, the pants heavily wrinkled where the fat legs under them met a fatter belly. His heart flipped and his lips turn numb. "Morning, Sheriff Tully," he said. "What can I get you?"

Ames Tully shook the counter, settling an elephant hip against it. "Can't sell me nothing, son. Give me five minutes of your time though. Where's your no-good brother?"

"He's not here."

Tully sniffed juicily and shifted a load of chewing tobacco from cheek to cheek. His breath was rank, his gaze kindly. "Walt, any fool can tell you 'n Hal came from the same mother, but the two of you are chalk and cheese. The truth is not in Hal, as the Bible says, but you couldn't lie for a dollar a word. So don't bandy words when I ask a civil question."

Walt sniggered breathlessly and shook his head. "Sorry, Mr. Tully. I only meant Hal's gone to Florida, I thought everyone knew that."

"Big state, Florida." Tully waited a moment. "Where's he at, or don't you know?"

"He said Tampa. That's where he went last time. But he's got a girl in St. Pete—she sent him a postcard last year."

Sheriff Tully nodded. "That's the way I hear it. Tampa." He spoke as if thinking aloud. "I'm a rotten peace officer look at it one way, a fair to good one look at it the other. Bittersweet's a quiet town, and that ain't entirely accidental.

"If you weren't a clean kid doing your best and I didn't have kind memories of your folks I'd have busted ol' Hal flat on his ass long since. Know Carina Martin, Davey Martin's woman? Widow-woman and a fool, not an uncommon combination. Gave Hal five hundred dollars to buy her a used tractor two days before he took off.

"Because she's a fool she believed she could get a machine that cheap and have any good out of it. Being a widow—well, you know your brother around anything female warm and moving. Miz Martin wants him arrested. I'll go through the motions, but even if we can locate Hal and get him dragged back here I calculate he'd give Carina a thousand dollars in grief defending himself in court."

The big man emerged from his reverie, prodding Walt in the chest. "If you're in touch with Hal, or hear from him, tell him to stay away. I don't want him back in Bittersweet. If you've got any sense at all you won't either."

Ames Tully waddled out. Walt stared after him for the longest while. Then he came out from behind the counter, locked the door, and switched the cardboard sign so that OPEN faced him. Then he went into the store-room where sacks, cartons, and cans made effective soundproofing and, putting his back against an angled-metal pillar, he slid down until his backside made contact with the concrete floor and laughed until his face was slimy, his ribs ached, his shirt was damp, and he feared he might suffocate.

On the fourth day, fearful that Hal might attempt to return to town, Walt went back to the cabin for the last time. He'd been practicing with the kit-gun. Speed wasn't important—lack of noise and an unobtrusive arm movement were. He was satisfied with his performance.

The candle was too limited a light. He timed his trip for daytime, closing the store early and getting to Shield Lake with twilight still an hour away.

"What's the matter with you?" Hal stormed, yanking him inside. And then, paling, "Has something gone wrong?"

"Not a thing," Walt said. He was hypnotized by his brother. He had shaved off the moustache and sideboards—Walt hadn't seen this much of his face in years. And he seem trimmer, noticeably younger.

"Disguise?" Walt asked, unable to keep a straight face.

Embarrassed, irritable, Hal shoved his hands into his waistband and shuffled like a dancing bear. "What's happening? Have they come up with a make on Lynda?"

"Maybe she isn't dead," Walt suggested. "What would you say if I made the whole thing up? Some gag, huh?"

Hal sneered. "You've never pulled a joke in your life, kid. You were born a little old man. No, a little old woman. In pants."

Walt clasped the butt of the revolver. "Why're you needling me, Hal?"

"I'm not needling you." Hal's yellow canine caught the corner of his upper lip, one among countless signals for a lie. So he was looking for a fight. Odd. "I'm nervous, that's all. I got to be moving."

"You will be," Walt assured him. "Sooner than you've dreamed."

"Good. That's why you came early, right? So we could start as soon as it gets dark—" He was spoiling for trouble. "O.K., you came through, delivered when it counted. I never thought you had the grit. But where it goes from here is what gets me. Mexico!" He spat the word.

Walt said, "Mexico's off. I've found a better location. Safe, quiet. They'll never find you." Wild giggling prickled the roof of his mouth like champagne. He *did* have a sense of humor. "Even some company for you." The fishes. His hand deep in the pocket of his windbreaker, he checked for the tenth time that the .32's safety catch was off.

Hal put a hand on Walt's shoulder. "Yeah, an old maid," he jeered. "We've really been the Odd Couple, you know that? You being so clean and tidy."

Keep it up, thought Walt. Have a party for the rest of your life. Five minutes, maximum. He sensed the years of pent rage and lethal dreaming dissolving his last restraints. Life would be dull without having this to anticipate, but suddenly he could bear to wait no longer. It was an ardor keen and elemental as love, allowing no further denial.

"Neat, neat, *neat*," Hal was gibbering. "Always so tidy, everything in its place, books here, letters there, documents, receipts, bills." His breath

hissed in. "Sorry, kid," he crooned, sounding not the least sorry, but wickedly amused, "but I need your passport."

The impact was totally unexpected and brutally hard. Walt heard as much as felt it in the initial split-second, a thump and a hard unthinkable click as sharp wood cleaved flesh and smashed bone. He had the illusion of flying, soaring gracefully, his face parallel with the floorboards. Then his head exploded and he was dimly aware of hitting the floor.

Warm blindness shrouded his vision, apart from one trickling chink like a melting keyhole. Hal had come round in front of him. A length of firewood dangled from his hand. Hal bent, as though to impart a secret. "That's how they kill seals in Canada—doesn't hurt a bit."

He went away, or Walt lost his senses.

Unable to see much, still prone on the floor, his head didn't exactly hurt but he knew he was dreadfully wounded. He could hear pretty well.

The sounds were lunatic, a chiming and jingling. Then a crash, and the smell of disturbed dust along with the saltiness of blood. The chain from the shed.

"No hard feelings, kid." Hal squatted on his heels and began twining the chain around his brother's legs, using soft iron wire to secure the first loop. "If it was you had offed Lynda, I'd have turned you in. But you had to take over, show you knew best.

"That was fine for a start. But Mexico—no way. I deserve better than that. And I got to thinking, here I was needing to get out of the country, and there you were, not wanted by anybody for anything, with that great passport you took out to go to Europe last year."

Hal jerked the chain and twisted another length of wire to fix its free end around Walt's narrow waist. "We look enough alike for it to work. I'll sneak home tonight, pick up your passport, take any cash you had. Use a busy airport, New York or Chicago, yeah, it'll work. Get out of this area before midnight, ditch the car, ride a bus. Yeah, it'll work."

He pushed his face close. "You're dying, kid. What d'you think about that?"

"Funny," Walt whispered, tongue liquid in blood. He meant that Hal was wrong; his sense of humor had developed overnight. It was hilarious. Hal was killing him to escape the imaginary crime Walt had devised to be the death of *him*.

"I think your head's stove in," Hal observed in the manner of a land-

scape artist describing a clump of bushes. "Anyway, you'll be swimming soon, straight to the bottom. Sorry, kid—it's you or me, and that's no choice at all."

It was perhaps his final flicker of strength and clarity, but Walt felt a surge of terrible desolation and grief. He hated Hal so much, he'd lived to kill him someday and he was dying with his quest unfinished. Spatteringly, he mouthed something. Hal cupped a hand to his ear. "Speak up, kid."

"Turn—me over. Lemme—look at you."

"Why not?" Hal was positively genial now. "On Death Row you get all last requests, huh? Here you go."

Walt's body was awkward, especially weighed by the chain. Hal had to straddle him and haul at his shoulder and hip. Lightning seared Walt's head and limbs.

Hal felt something hard pressing into his side, tried to scramble up, and slipped in Walt's blood. *Too close to miss.* Sliding down the eternity-long ramp into something deeper, darker, colder than Shield Lake, the tightening spark of Walt Cannard's ego throbbed in triumph.

It knew he had just enough strength to pull the trigger.

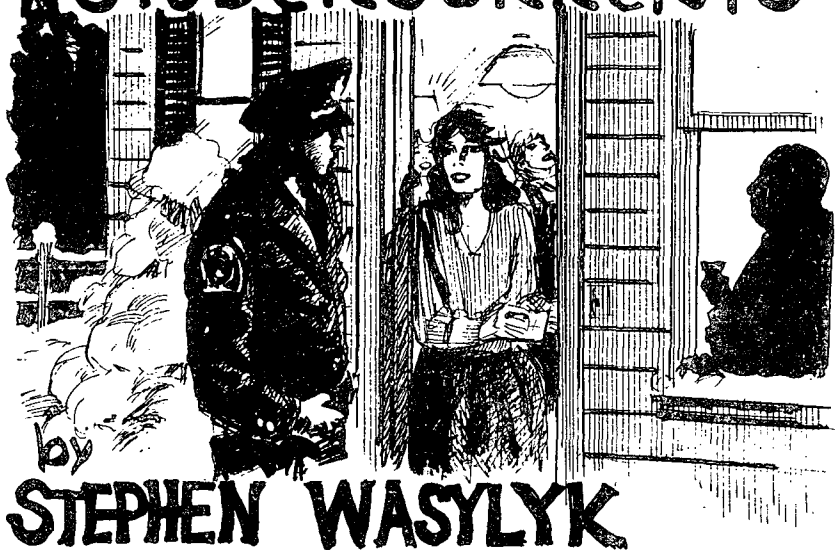
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Fox River winters have a way of twisting your mind . . .

CURRENTS AND UNDERCURRENTS



STEPHEN WASYLYK

The phone company will undoubtedly attest that since the bell on any phone is a mechanical device its ring must necessarily be identical each time. It is not true of the one in the sheriff's office in Fox River.

I can tell before I pick it up if the call is routine or if there is trouble, a precognitive talent Julio has also acquired, so when his eyes rolled as he reached for the jangling instrument, I knew my dark-haired, mustachioed deputy felt the same way I did.

This call meant trouble.

After he had listened he said, "We'll look into it right away, Mrs. Courtland, and get back to you. Don't worry. Sheriff Gates and I will find him."

He dropped the phone into the cradle. "Why couldn't the day end quietly? That was Mrs. Courtland. Henry drove the station wagon into town right after lunch. He was to be home by four. He still isn't there."

I glanced at my watch. It was close to six. I swung my feet from the desk. "I'll take it. You might as well go home."

"I'll hold the fort here for a while. Since my wife's held dinner this long she can't get any angrier than she is now, and you might need help. Do you think Henry had an accident?"

"We'd have heard about it, unless he lost control and went off the road and no one passing has noticed. I doubt if anything happened to him while he was in town or we'd have heard about that too. I'll drive out to his house and keep my eyes open. Knowing Henry, I'm willing to bet that if he said he'd be home by four he started back from town in plenty of time."

I stepped out into the cold winter night and pulled my coat collar up around my ears. Like Julio I wondered why the day couldn't end quietly. Running around Fox River County with the temperature in the teens and a night wind dropping the chill factor down to zero had a tendency to drain the milk of human kindness from anyone. Henry, I thought grimly, I like you but you had damned well better have a good reason for being late.

A half hour later I found the station wagon parked partially off the road, its hood lifted like the gaping maw of some huge animal that had died gasping for breath, but the trouble wasn't air, it was water. When I parked and went back and poked my flashlight under the open hood, the gaping tear in the upper radiator hose was very clear. I touched the engine. Stone cold. The car had been there for hours.

There was no sign of Henry. The only testimony to his presence was the keys in the ignition and the footprints he'd left in the snow when he'd lifted the hood.

To either side of me the fields gleamed white in the starlit darkness, the road a ribbon of black rolling and dipping with the hills.

I went back to the four-wheel-drive and called Julio.

"I found his station wagon," I said. "No sign of Henry. It's been here since this afternoon, probably before four. He blew a radiator hose, overheated, and had to pull over."

"That gives him plenty of time to have found help."

"For something that simple, he didn't need any. He always carried enough in his wagon to fix anything short of a major breakdown. I know he carried tape and a gallon of water. He could have patched this thing in ten minutes and limped home. Can't be more than four miles. And even if he couldn't, he was close enough to have walked. It wasn't that cold this afternoon."

"So where did he go?"

"Right now I don't have the foggiest notion. But it's not that easy to disappear completely in Fox River. I'll drive on to his farm and talk to his wife. If we're lucky he may be home by now or she's heard from him."

"Want me to send a tow truck for the wagon?"

"No. If he doesn't turn up tonight, I'll want to look it over in daylight."

I hung up the mike, took my flashlight, and went back. The footprints where Henry had stood to open the hood were the total record of his movements once he left the car. I walked a few yards down the road, crossed, and came back. There was a layer of snow over everything except the road itself. If Henry had left the pavement at any point he would have left a trail, but the snow on both sides was unbroken.

I pulled a pair of barriers out of the four-wheel-drive and set them up with their blinking lights front and rear of the disabled car. There wouldn't be much traffic along this road, which was used primarily by the farmers who lived along it, but it was partially blocking the traffic lane and I didn't want anyone coming along and crashing into it.

Back in the four-wheel-drive, I started cautiously toward Henry's house, keeping my eyes on the shoulder where it dropped away into a shallow ditch. There was always the possibility that Henry had started to walk and was the victim of a hit-and-run.

After two miles the lights in the windows of a small house on a hill gleamed through the darkness. The Nelsons' house, the Courtlands' neighbors. Which opened another possibility. Henry could have walked this far and turned in to use the phone, except I was fairly certain he hadn't. When the Nelsons first moved in, Henry's wife thought he was being far too neighborly, particularly since Mrs. Nelson was younger and

prettier. Unless Henry was looking for trouble from his wife he'd have steered clear of the place—and Henry never looked for trouble.

I kept going.

Another two miles of deserted road and I turned into the lane that led to Henry's house, pulled up in front, and knocked on the door.

Mrs. Courtland was a short woman with a once-pretty face that had been sharpened and hardened from sun and wind through the years, a stern woman who allowed Henry little leeway, which made me wonder why she had waited two hours to call us.

Her first words when she opened the door were, "Did you find him, Sheriff?"

"No, ma'am," I said. "All I've found so far is the car. It broke down about four miles away."

I expected a certain amount of anger, but that must have passed some time ago. Now there was only worry written on her face. I sensed why. A Fox River winter on a farm like this with companionship was hard enough to take. Without companionship, it generally led to pulling up stakes and moving closer to humanity.

"Come in." She led me into a small living room and turned to face me, a middle-aged woman with greying hair cut short, a man's shirt tucked into worn jeans. She had always worked as hard as Henry on the farm. "I knew something would happen," she said.

"Why?"

"Because of the money. I told him we should go together, that it would be safer that way. But he said no, he could handle it."

"What money?"

"The thousand dollars he was supposed to draw from the bank. We take one of those Caribbean cruises every year at this time. We have the tickets and all, but we need pocket money." She shook her head. "I should have gone with him. It's my fault if anything's happened to him."

"We don't know that anything has."

"Of course it has. Otherwise he'd be here." She covered her face with her hands. "Henry's been a little edgy lately, I don't know why—but I didn't want to do something he might resent. It wouldn't have made a good start for our trip." Wide and worried, her eyes fixed on me. "What could have happened to him, Sheriff Gates?"

"I don't know, but we've only begun to look. Don't worry, Mrs. Court-

land. Why don't you call someone to stay with you while I see what I can do?"

She shook her head. "There is no one I want. You go ahead. I'll just sit and wait for word." She spoke as though it was a punishment she deserved.

"Julio is in the office. If you hear anything, call him. He'll get in touch with me."

Outside, I sat in the four-wheel-drive and thought. Fixing that broken hose would have been only a temporary inconvenience for someone as knowledgeable and handy as Henry. Yet he hadn't bothered. Why? Obviously because an alternative had presented itself that was more attractive.

There was only one way he could have left the scene if he hadn't walked—and that was to be picked up by another car. Yet that car hadn't brought him home, so he either hadn't wanted to come home or he couldn't. Since he had a thousand dollars in his pocket, the last possibility made me nervous.

If I assumed someone picked him up, the problem was to find the car. The road was little used. My best bet was to question the dozen families who lived along it, a process that would take several hours unless I lucked out. I had to start somewhere so I headed for the Nelson farm.

The Nelsons were younger than the Courtlands. They had bought the farm not to be farmers but because they wanted the solitude and the space. Mrs. Nelson was a small, slight woman given to wearing shapeless sweatshirts and her hair in a bun. She did some sort of writing. He was a big heavy man with a red beard who wore short-sleeved shirts open to his chest even in the dead of winter. What he did, I didn't know, although it was rumored he had owned a small business that had been in the way of some sort of civic improvement in Philadelphia, for which he had received an inordinately large sum and now he lived off the interest of his investments.

After I told them about Henry I said, "I think someone came along and gave him a lift. Did either of you happened to see a car pass on the road at about a quarter to four?"

They both shook their heads, which didn't surprise me. I'd probably get the same reaction wherever I went.

I nodded and headed for the door, when Mrs. Nelson lifted a hand.

"Gil Loft might have. He was here this afternoon trying to sell us an

insurance policy. He left about that time—" she turned to her husband "—wouldn't you say, dear?"

He grinned. "I know that at three-thirty I was wishing he'd give up and leave. It couldn't have been much later when he finally did."

I didn't know if Loft could help, but the timing was right. To get back to town he'd have had to pass Henry going in the opposite direction. In this business you take what you get and stay with it until it peters out or leads somewhere.

I went by Henry's disabled station wagon at full speed.

Gil Loft had made a decent living selling insurance until his first wife had decided Fox River was too cold in winter and too hot in summer and boring during all seasons, so she had left him and divorced him a year ago. Gil had lost interest in the insurance business until he showed up with a new wife he'd found in New York, this one much younger and prettier; and for a time he was again the Gil Loft we'd always known. But it wasn't long before the rumors started that the new wife had the same complaints as the first Mrs. Loft and Gil began to be seen too often in various drinking places in the county. The lives of the residents of Fox River County were like the currents and undercurrents swirling beneath the surface of the river, and the eddies they created sometimes straightened out and disappeared. Sometimes they became deeper.

A half hour later I pulled up before his darkened office. He wasn't keeping late hours tonight. I called Julio.

"Gil Loft was on the road at just about the time Henry was," I told him. "He might have seen something so I'm trying to track him down. Have you heard anything new?"

"Nothing about Henry, but the ski lodge called about two drunks raising hell in the bar. They want them removed, so I thought I'd run out there and accommodate them."

At least once a week, skiers at the lodge get carried away celebrating a good day or a bad one. Usually all Julio or I had to do was ask them to return to their rooms but every so often we'd have to pop them into a cell until they sobered up. It wasn't that much of a chore, but what I resented tonight was that it would take time away from the search for Henry.

"Hell," I said. "Couldn't they have waited until tomorrow?"

"That's the way it goes," said Julio. "I told them I'd handle it."

"You're in enough trouble with your wife already. Go home before she

drapes that dinner around your neck instead of putting it on the table. I'll take care of it. Gil's house is halfway there and he'll either know something or he won't. I shouldn't be tied up very long."

A melange of cars parked on both sides of the road marked the Loft house. The rock music was loud even through the closed windows. It required several rings of the bell before the door opened.

The woman in the doorway with the drink in her hand was young, perhaps in her late twenties. The music pounding behind her was deafening.

"I'd like to see Gil, Mrs. Loft."

She said something that was lost in the music. I pulled her outside and half closed the door.

"I said he wasn't home."

"Do you know where he is?"

She shook her head. "And I don't care. I told him we were having this party and to be home early. He said he didn't want a party. He said we have too many parties." She held up the glass. "How can anyone have too many parties? I mean, that's what life is all about, isn't it, Sheriff? To have a good time? I think I've just about had it with Gil. When I married him, he seemed to be with it, but he's turning out to be just another old man. There are people who are forty-five, and then there are people who are *forty-five*. Like him telling me we don't need the stereo I just bought." She shook her head. "I don't know where he is and I don't care. And if he never comes home, I won't care about that either."

I headed the four-wheel-drive toward the ski lodge. Gil still might be able to help if I could find him, but I had no idea where to look.

As I'd told Julio, Fox River isn't so big you can disappear easily, but still I had no way of connecting the drunks in the ski lodge with the two men I was looking for. Residents generally don't frequent the bar at the lodge. The prices are high and the locals have little in common with the skiers.

So when I walked in and saw Henry and Gil, arms over each other's shoulders, leaning on the bar and singing very loudly off-key, I was a little surprised.

I walked up behind them and said, "The party's over, boys."

Henry was a tall man, thin and tough from days spent working the fields. He turned and smiled.

"Hello, Gates. What are *you* doing here?"

"I've been looking for you since six o'clock. Your wife's been worrying since four. Didn't it occur to you she'd be concerned when you didn't come home?"

He rubbed his jaw. "Well, yeah, but I sort of forgot."

Gil was a little shorter than Henry and a great deal heavier, his pleasant face drawn into harsh lines, pouches under his eyes. He reached for his glass.

"You can bet my wife isn't worrying about me, so I'll just stay here."

"I think not," I said. "Both of you have had enough for one day. Let's go."

The cold night air of a Fox River winter will sober anyone up in a hurry, so I lowered the windows as they climbed into the rear seat.

As I rolled out of the parking lot I tossed the question over my shoulder. "Mind telling me what brought this on?"

"No big thing," said Henry. "No big thing at all. When that car broke down it was about all I could take, the way things have been going lately. I kept thinking about that cruise I don't want to go on, all those cruises I've never wanted to go on. I never could stand the sight of so much water. It makes me sick just thinking about it. I told myself last time that if she insisted on going again I'd throw her overboard. But she just went ahead and made all the arrangements the way she usually does, without even asking me, so when that car broke down I'd had enough."

"I was standing there kicking the tires when Gil came along and offered me a lift home. I didn't want to go home, I told him. He felt the same way, he said. He was thinking about going somewhere and getting drunk. I thought that was a helluva idea, so that's what we did."

"Ever tell your wife you didn't like those cruises, Henry?" I asked.

"What for? She's not going to listen. She hasn't listened to me in twenty years. Besides, what could we do with the tickets now? We can't turn them in without a stiff penalty. She wouldn't go for that."

We drove in silence for a mile.

"I've been thinking," said Gil. "If you don't want to go on that cruise it might be something my wife would enjoy. Maybe I could make a deal for the tickets, take her away for a week and see what happens."

"Hey," said Henry. "That's a good idea."

"If your wife agrees," said Gil.

I thought of the worry on Mrs. Courtland's face. "I think she will," I ventured. "I *could* put you both in a cell overnight, but I'll drop you off home instead. See what you can work out."

Gil stood for a moment when I let him out, listening to the music blasting inside, then he smiled, squared his shoulders, and wove his way toward the door for all the world as if he'd been looking forward to the party all evening.

"You know, Gates," said Henry. "Maybe we did something good here tonight. From the way he talked, she's pushing him too hard and too far, partying all the time and running him broke. He told me if he sold insurance twenty-four hours a day he couldn't keep up with the bills. He's not like me. I figure that what I bought I have to live with, but one woman pulled out on him and he expected too much from this one. He's getting a little frayed around the edges and I didn't like the way he kept saying he was going to teach her a lesson. What kind of talk is that?"

"Probably just talk, Henry." The trouble between them just might get straightened out on the cruise if the ticket swap went through. I hoped so.

Henry's wife heard the four-wheel-drive coming up the lane and stood in the open doorway. From the look on her face, Henry would have no trouble selling the cruise tickets to Gil. Good old dependable Henry had always been there, but when he'd disappeared it had shaken her up. Henry should find life easier from now on, though he might not understand why.

Julio happened to see them at the bus station a few days later, leaving on the first leg of a trip to California. Henry told him Gil and his wife had already left on the cruise.

I settled back and allowed myself a grin—which was a little premature because four days later Carter, the editor of the local weekly, stopped in and placed a sheet of paper on my desk.

"This is just off the wire service," he said. "I thought you'd like to know."

Currents and undercurrents, I thought as I read. It was a short item, stating in a few impersonal sentences that Rhea Loft had accidentally fallen overboard from a cruise ship in the Caribbean.

I knew it would have been investigated thoroughly before they termed

it accidental, but I couldn't help thinking that when Gil had squared his shoulders and marched so readily into the house that night he might have been considering what Henry had said about throwing his wife overboard. And any good insurance man would certainly carry double indemnity on his wife.

Rhea's accident would solve his marital problem and pay off those debts of his.

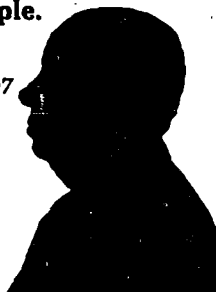
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The woods were too quiet . . .

NOT A WHIPPERWILL CALLED

by CAROL
MYERS
MARTIN



“Ainie ain’t right.” That’s what folks says about me. I’ve heared ’em plenty of times.

They mean I ain’t right in the head o’course. It don’t bother me. It’s true. I’ve knowed it all my life.

’Sides, I’ve heared plenty about them, the ones that’s doin’ the talkin’, about the things they do that ain’t right neither.

I can’t help bein’ the way I am.

Ma said it was the way God made me so I just do the best I can with what He give me to work with.

I git along all right. People hires me to do little jobs they don't want to dirty their hands with. Daddy left us this little farm, my brother and me. I stay here and work it. So I make a livin'. And him and his wife comes out to see about me right often.

They think they got to look out for me and I 'preciate it. Sometimes I feel like they're tellin' me what to do, but I knows they're doin' it 'cause they worry about me and I knows it's a heap better to have somebody tellin' you what to do than not to have anybody that cares about you atall.

Now I ain't gonna call that poor girl's name or the boy's neither. If you read about it in the papers you already know 'em anyway. I ain't gonna call any names I don't have to. "Don't tell tales and names too," Ma used to say and I still try to 'bide by it.

Anyways, I'd been over to my neighbor's that night, watchin' television. Him and his wife, they're an old couple, they invite me over real often. They gets lonesome, like I do sometimes.

We all got interested in this here murder movie and I stayed later than I meant to. So the old man, he offered to drive me home in his pickup. But I said, shucks, no, he needed his rest. 'Sides, I could take the short cut and 'most be home while he was gettin' the truck started.

The short cut is a loggin' road they cut through the woods back o' my place. To git it, I had to walk a little piece down the main road.

I didn't see but one car and that was right near where I turned off. With all them blinker lights, it looked like a Christmas decoration, flashin' red an' yeller.

It was in the ditch, I seen when I got to it. I stepped up an' looked inside, thinkin' maybe there was somebody in there needin' help. But it was empty so I guessed they was already took care of.

I turned off on the loggin' road. I've always liked to walk that road at night. You see animals and birds you wouldn't even know was there in the daytime. Whipperwills settin' right there in the road-callin', possums and skunks, now an' then a Mammy with a whole gang o' little ones behind her. Oncet or twicet I met a pretty coon, just walkin' alone, not scared at all.

But that night, I noticed it the minute I stepped in the woods, was

different. It was too quiet. I didn't hear one whipperrwill. On a pretty night like that the road shoulda been full of 'em.

Nothin' else was stirrin' neither. I didn't even hear varmints movin' around in the brush. It was so still it was scary. I almost turned around and went home by the main road. But I thought that'd be crazy, all that extra walkin'.

When I come around the bend and saw the car I thought I'd run up on a lovin' couple. I was thinkin' I'd just go off in the brush and circle around the car, I didn't want them to see me an' think I was watchin' 'em, when I heared a sound. Like somebody cryin' an' moanin'.

I moved a little closer an' I saw this boy holdin' a girl in his arms, which was about what I'd expected to see. Only this girl was twistin' and strugglin' an' tryin' to git away. I could see her plain in the moonlight. It was her makin' them pitiful noises. Somethin' was tied over her mouth an' I seen her hands was tied too.

I started to run to 'em, to try to help her. But before I took more'n five steps I seen him draw back one arm and shove somethin' Hard. She just wilted down, you know, like a mornin' glory in the hot sun. He let her fall on down on the ground and I seen the knife handle stickin' outa the side o' her chest. It was awful—Lawd, the awfulest thing I ever seen!

He bent over an' pulled out the knife an' stood holdin' it, lookin' around like a scared rabbit.

He seen me an' I got a good look at his face. I knowed him! I've worked for his daddy and mama lots. They was nice folks, well thought of.

"Ainie?" he says like he wasn't real sure it was me.

"Is that you, Ainie?"

I says, "Yes, it's me."

He come up close to me, still holdin' that bloody knife, an' he asked, "Did you see what happened, Ainie?"

I said yes I did an' was goin' straight to Sheriff Silk and tell him.

He says, "No, you're not, Ainie." An' he drawed the knife back like he was gonna stick it in me like he'd stuck it in that poor girl layin' back yonder.

But I wasn't no scared little girl an' I'm strong as a bull. I got ahold o' his wrist with one hand an' twisted till he dropped the knife. Then I picked it up.

He just stared at me like he thought I was gonna use it on him. But I wasn't, I'd never kill anybody. That's a sin, killin' people is.

I just looked back at him, thinkin' what a cute little boy he used to be, playin' around where I was workin'. He'd growed up handsome but his face was all ugly an' evil-lookin' then.

Fin'ly he asked, "What're you goin' to do, Ainie?"

"Why, like I said, I'm goin' straight to Sheriff Silk and tell him what you done."

He shook his head, "No, you're not, Ainie, not if you know what's good for you."

I says I was so an' wasn't nothin' he could do to stop me.

He kinda grinned an' says, "I'll tell him you did it, Ainie. Her car ran in the ditch back there on the road. You came along and found her, a pretty girl, alone. You dragged her out here in the woods and you attacked her and then you killed her. I saw her car and stopped to help. I heard her screaming. I ran to her but it was too late. When I got here, she was dead and you were standing here with a bloody knife in your hand."

"That ain't so," I hollered. "It wasn't like that! You was the one—"

But he cut me off. "Who do you think the sheriff'll believe, Ainie? Who do you think's gonna get hung if you tell?"

I was so mixed up I didn't know what to do. I knowed he was lyin' but it coulda been the way he told it if anybody didn't know different.

I just walked away from him, on up the road, past that poor little girl's body.

"Think about it, Ainie!" I heared him hollerin'. "Think about what it'd feel like to be hung!"

Just before I got to my house I noticed I was still carryin' that knife. I don't know how, but I'd forget I had it. I took and throwed the hateful thing in a patch o' ferns by the road.

When I got in sight o' my house I seen lights on an' I knowed my brother an' his wife had come to spend the night. I sure was glad to see 'em. They'd know what I ought to do.

They'd brought their supper with 'em an' was throwin' the napkins an' wrappers an' stuff in my tin heater.

"Come on, Ainie," my brother's wife says, "we brought you a hamburger and some fries. Eat 'em before they get cold."

"No, thank you," I says.

"What? You don't want a hamburger, Ainie? You must be sick!" My brother was carryin' on his foolishness, but I *was* feelin' sick an' when he looked at my face he seen it.

"What's wrong, Ainie?" he asked, serious.

I told 'em what'd happened an' I said, "Take me in to see Sheriff Silk. Let's hurry—that poor girl's layin' out there dead an' don't nobody even know it."

My brother's wife had been listenin' like she was froze, not movin', just standin' there with that hamburger in her hand, holdin' it out to me. But she spoke then.

"You can't go to the sheriff, Ainie."

"What're you talkin' about? I got to go an' tell him."

"No, Ainie, you mustn't! You mustn't tell him or anyone else what you saw, not anybody. Do you understand?"

"No!" I turned to my brother but he was shakin' his head too.

"She's right, Ainie. It'd be just his word against yours and you know what they say about you, so you know who the sheriff and everybody else will believe."

I couldn't take it in. Looked like my own kin was goin' against me, but I reckon'd I knowed what they was thinkin'. They was thinkin' about somethin' else folks says about me: "Ainie, he can't tell a straight tale. You can't believe nothin' he tells."

I know they says that. I don't go to lie, but a lot o' times I gets mixed up an' I reckon I do tell things wrong. I don't go to, when I tell somethin', I think I'm tellin' it right but someway it ain't. Folks says I tell a thing the way I want it to be, not the way it is.

Now I wondered if my own kin believed what I was sayin'.

I felt my eyes fillin' up an' I started cryin'. I couldn't stop myself.

My brother's wife says, real soft, "Don't feel bad, Ainie. There's nothin' you can do to help that girl anyway. You can't bring her back, no matter who you tell and you could get yourself in serious trouble."

"That's true, Ainie," my brother says.

"I don't wanta be hung," I says.

"You wouldn't be hung," he says. "They don't hang people in this state these days. But they might take you away and put you in a hospital someplace and keep you there. You don't want that an' we don't."

"No," I says, "but it's wrong, her layin' out there dead in them dark woods an' him goin' on just like he ain't done nothin'."

"Yes, it's wrong, Ainie," my brother says. "But that's the way things are and there's nothin' we can do about it. Come on now, tell me where you put the knife. We have to go and find it."

"Why? I don't want to see it no more!"

"Your fingerprints are on it, Ainie. You watch murder shows on TV. You know they'll take fingerprints when they find it."

"His'un's on it too!"

"He'd say he got them on it when he took the knife from you. Come on, Ainie, show me where it is."

So we went an' got it an' my brother dropped it in the heater an' burnt the handle up.

His wife looked at me real close an' said, "There's blood on your shirt, Ainie. You must've got it off the knife blade. Go change to another one and let me wash that one. Right now."

I done it an' she washed that one an' hung it by the tin heater to dry.

Well, the men comin' to cut logs found the body the next mornin'.

Everybody in the neighborhood was just struck dumb. She was so pretty and popular, they said. Who'd've wanted to do her thataway? Some said anybody'd do a thing like that oughta be shot. Some said, no, he had to be sick in the head and oughta be put away for his own good and everybody else's.

I like to went crazy, hearin' talk like that, knowin' what I knowed.

I couldn't sleep much them nights. When I did, I kept dreamin' I was walkin' along that loggin' road again, seein' that car an' livin' through the whole thing again.

Sometimes I got to wonderin' if that *was* the way it was. Maybe I'd got it wrong like I done so many things I'd told. Maybe I *did* do it!

On the day of the funeral, almost everybody went.

I didn't. I'm scared o' the dead, them that's been kilt in partic'lar. Them's the ones, Ma said, that comes back, not them that dies content, in the fullness o' time. The murdered ones, they comes back till the wrong done 'em's been righted.

That poor girl knowed who kilt her and if I went in that church I thought she'd rise right up in her coffin and point to me in front of everybody because I knowed an' I was the only one on earth who did for sure.

Sheriff Silk had hired me to do some work for him a week or more ago. I decided to go on over the day of the funeral. He was at the funeral, so I set down in the yard and waited for him to come back.

"Oh, Ainie," he said, surprised, "I didn't expect you today. I thought you'd go to the funeral."

"I didn't have nothin' fittin' to wear," I told him.

"Well, you prob'ly couldn'ta got in the church anyway. Looked like everybody in the county was there."

"You got any idee who done it, Sheriff?"

"Naw. Not even a clue. We think somebody ran her car off the road and carried her off up that loggin' road to where he assaulted an' killed her. But the logger's trucks wiped out any tracks he might've left before they even knew what'd happened."

He looked at me an' then he looked away. "Funny you never saw or heard anything, Ainie. It happenin' right behind your house like it did."

He got out a cigarette an' lit it. "I never asked you, o' course, but I know if you knew anything you'd tell me."

I says, "If you'll just show me what you want me to do I'll git started."

"Sure, Ainie. Right over here. I want these weeds cut and raked up and then I'll show you what else I want done."

I took the little grass blade off the hook an' started cuttin' weeds.

Sheriff Silk, he just stood there watchin' me.

It was hot. I started to sweat.

I was kinda nervous too—I don't like people watchin' me when I work. They usually find somethin' wrong with what I'm doin' an' go to fussin' about it.

But the sheriff wasn't sayin' nothin' an' that was almost worse than bein' fussed at, 'cause I didn't know what he was thinkin' about.

Fin'ly, I just had to say somethin'. I opened my mouth an' that boy's name just popped out. I didn't mean for it to. Real quick, I tried to make it sound like a nat'ral thing to say by askin', "Was he at the funeral?"

"Why, yes. Looked awful, like he was takin' it hard," Sheriff Silk says. "I thought he was goin' with the girl but they tell me they'd broke up. In fact, his mama said he was out of town, visiting friends, the night it happened. It was a terrible shock to him when he got back and they told him. She was goin' with somebody else but he still thought a lot of her."

The sheriff just stood there smokin', not sayin' nothin' for a while.

Then he says low, like he was talkin' to hisself, "Wonder who he knows out of town? That boy's never been out of the county as far as I know and I've known him all his life."

Then he spoke up to me and says, "You just finish those weeds, Ainie, and go on home. I'll see you later about what else I want done. . . ."

I was expectin' the sheriff all the rest of the day but he didn't get there till late.

"Well, Ainie," he says, "I reckon you know why I'm here."

I says, "I think so, Sheriff."

"Why didn't you tell me, Ainie?" he asked, soundin' real kind.

"I was scared."

He lit a cigarette and smiled: "Well, you don't have to be, Ainie. Nobody's gonna hurt you."

I says, "He said he was gonna say I done it if I told. Did you tell him I told, Sheriff? Do I have to go now?"

"I figured something like that. No, Ainie, you don't have to do anything. I just asked him the name and address of the people he was visiting the night of the murder and he confessed. Broke down and told me everything".

I couldn't hardly believe what I was hearin'. It was just like my whole life had been took away and give back to me!

The sheriff put his hand on my shoulder. "Why, you didn't tell, Ainie. You just asked me if he was at the funeral."

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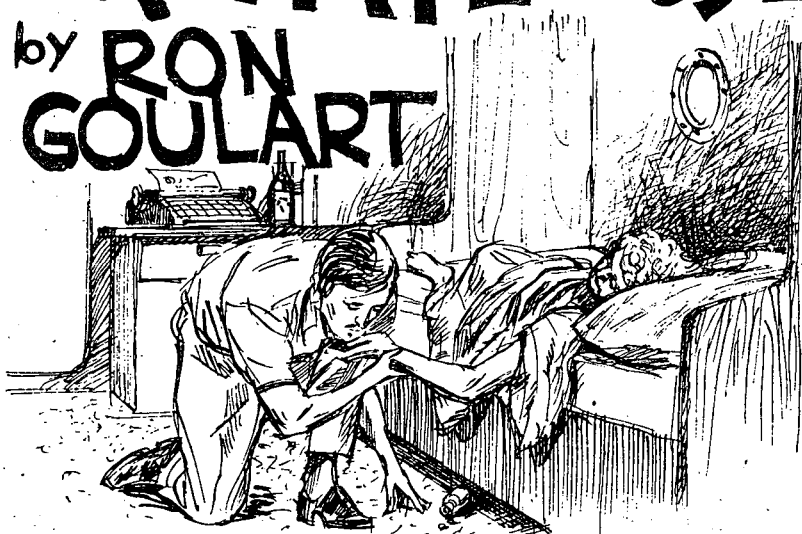
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Les was hypersensitive to all kinds of smells and odors . . .

PRIVATE NOSE

by **RON
GOULART**



The faint scent of rose petals drifted into his nostrils. Les Moyles sneezed, once and then twice, and sat up on his side of the bunk. Early-morning light showed outside the cabin window. A few gulls were gliding through the ocean air. Les, sneezing twice more, eased up out of bed and made his way across the gently swaying floor. There was a detergent odor wafting up to him from his discarded clothes.

Crouching, he frisked his jacket until he located his plastic bottle of

prescription antihistamine. After shaking two of the bluecoated tablets into his palm, he returned the bottle to the pocket. He dressed quickly, then carried the two tablets to the sink in the small bathroom. The rose odor was stronger here, mixed with those of perfumed soap, damp tile, and unseen mildew.

The drinking glass smelled of peppermint mouthwash. He rinsed it three times, filled it with water, and swallowed down the tablets.

"All in your mind," said Laura Casper from the bunk.

Les sniffed. "No, it's my nose," he said, coming back into the cabin.

She was a slim blonde young woman of twenty-nine, pretty, tanned, sitting up in the rumpled bed wearing the tops of a pair of paisley pajamas.

"Dr. Handelsmann doesn't think so."

"He can't afford to admit he does or I could sue him for malpractice."

"How can you sue the second most respected allergist in all of New England?"

"Same way you'd sue the most respected." He moved across the room and sat on the bunk edge. "My respect for him started going down from the day I smelled pizza and hot fudge on him. Giving me a junkfood-free diet while he—"

"But his private life isn't—"

"Would you go to a cancer specialist who chainsmoked?"

"You don't have cancer, you have hay fever."

He nodded, saying, "Yep, and because of some bizarre tinkering Handelsmann did to my nose while supposedly testing me for allergic reactions I am now hypersensitive to all sorts of smells and odors. I thought I suggested you quit wearing perfume until—"

"I'm not wearing perfume. I merely happened to dab on a little rose-water last night," said Laura, frowning. "You make it really tough to be romantic, Les. When we get married, if I deck the place with orange blossoms you'll probably come sneezing down the aisle and—"

"Good, fine, kid my infirmity."

She put both hands on his shoulders. "Les, I love you, remember?" Her face was close to his. "I am loyal, adoring, and noncritical. For a feisty lady book-editor I'm really amazingly docile and supportive."

"You are, yes," he admitted. "But I'm not actually goofy, Laura, and when I say my nasal acuity is—"

"Let's talk about some other part of you," she said. "I get somewhat weary chatting about your nose all—"

"O.K., sorry." He stood, backing away from the bunk. "This trip hasn't been too bad though, has it? Two days aboard the private yacht of—"

"One of the biggest scoundrels in New York publishing."

Les gazed out the cabin window. The sea was brightening. "Some people don't like Bascom Gump, true. Yet I—"

"Some? You consider eight million some?"

"I know, Laura. You'd like me to do a book for you over at Astute House," he said, "but I am not, as I keep telling you, a serious writer. I'm a hack. I really enjoy writing for Gump Paperbacks."

"Grinding out dumb macho westerns about a dumb cowboy under the dumb name of Bat Palfry."

"No, Bat Palfry is my character's name, the one-armed gunfighter with the insatiable lust for lovely ladies. The penname I use is Draw Deegan."

"Equally dopey." She decided to swing out of bed. "Honestly, Les, with your talent you could be getting far larger advances than you are."

"I earned \$100,000 last year. I'm satisfied."

"But you had to grind out six Bats Belfry books to make that."

"Palfry. If you'd read my stuff you'd—"

"I do read it," she told him from the bathroom doorway. "I spend my working days at Astute House reading mostly pretentious garbage and then I go home and, when we're not together, I read your dopey westerns. A one-armed cowboy who smokes cigars even in bed is so—"

"I'm going for a stroll on the deck."

Laura returned to him. "I do love you, you know," she told him as she halted a yard from him. "I'm glad we're on this little cruise, even if it means putting up with Bascom Gump and his latest wife and the other simps he invited along."

"Tony Golem isn't a simp," said Les. "Just because he's my editor at Gump Paperbacks doesn't mean—"

"He looks like a loser in the Erik Estrada look-alike contest. You're infinitely more attractive than he is."

"True, but even if a guy doesn't have my macho charm he—"

"Go stroll," she advised. "We'll have breakfast in an hour or so." She stretched up on bare feet and kissed him.

Les sneezed.

The cabin door creaked as he passed it in the corridor. It was swinging

back and forth, giving sliced glimpses of the shadowy room beyond. A strong smell of liquor came swirling out at Les. And something else.

A faint, sad scent that reminded him of funerals and graveyards.

He halted and tapped on the open door. "Iris? Are you O.K. in there?"

Actually he didn't much care. The hefty Iris Vunder was a long way from being one of his favorite people. An effective literary agent, he kept hearing, but much too abrasive for him. And she was always saturated with a perfume that suggested a tropical island on a hot day.

"Iris? You sick?"

The odor of scotch surrounded him, tinted with a trace of cigarette smoke. "That's funny," he muttered and stepped across the cabin threshold. Iris was a violent antismoker, never let anyone get near her with a lit cigarette.

He saw her then. Sprawled on the still-made bunk, one fat arm dangling and her thick fingers all pointing to the spilled bottle of pills on the cabin's thick blue rug.

She was dead, no doubt of it. Dead and cold.

Les, after touching her wrist, looked around the room. Her portable typewriter was open on the narrow desk and there was a sheet of paper rolled into it. Next to the typewriter sat an empty scotch bottle and a glass.

It's a lousy world and I'm better out of it had been typed on the sheet of yellow copy paper.

Les pressed at the spot between his eyes. Bending, he sniffed at the typewriter. The keys smelled of lemons. Lemons and—radishes. Does that make any sense? He frowned at the empty liquor bottle and glass, then leaned over and sniffed them. Soap?

A dim odor of scotch, a much stronger one of soap.

He went over to the dead agent's body. Down on one knee, he took hold of her hand and sniffed at it.

The odor of booze was there, but not a trace of lemons or soap.

Why would she wash the glass *and* the bottle? He straightened up. Something to fill the time while waiting to die?

He went into the bathroom. Mildew and damp. That South Seas at High Noon perfume. No lemons, no radishes. But this was the soap used on the glass and the bottle. Les, feeling a shade silly, smelled at the sink.

Yeah, they were rinsed out here, there's still a hint of the scotch smell.

Shaking his head, he went back into the dead woman's cabin. It was supposed to look like suicide, but it isn't.

He left the cabin, closing the door on the corpse.

"That dimwitted bimbo," said Bascom Gump.

"He's really quite saddened," said his current wife, a slender red-haired girl of twenty-three.

"Now we'll have to head back for port," said Gump, who was short, weatherbeaten, and fifty-seven. "I'm not going to have a moldering corpse on the *Lady Suzi* while—"

"*Lady Judi*," said his current wife. "You rechristened it, after me, remember? Suzi was your fourth—"

"Damn Iris, killing herself on my pleasure cruise."

"I don't think," said Les carefully as he leaned in the doorway of the large spotless yacht galley, "it's a suicide, Bascom."

The publisher of Gump Paperbacks scowled, ceased chopping mushrooms on the large butcher block. "Eh?"

Judi Gump blinked and adjusted the shoulder strap of her azure bikini. "Surely, Les—It is O.K., isn't it, if I call you Les even though we only just met yesterday, because your wonderful books about Draw Deegan are such favorites of Basc's and—"

"I'm Draw Deegan, my macho cowpoke is named—"

"What do you mean that blimpy broad didn't kill herself? You told me she left a suicide note."

"Somebody did," said Les. "I have a feeling she was murdered."

"Well, quit feeling that," suggested Gump. "We'll zoom back to Westport, dump her unsightly carcass, and—"

"But, Basc, if it's *murder* we—"

"He writes about a one-armed cowboy," said the publisher, pointing at Les with his chopping knife, "not about a private dick. What's he know about murder?"

"There are certain things about the scene that—"

"Forget them." Gump returned to his mushrooms. "Have an omelette with us."

"He's a marvelous chef," said Judi, smiling at her little husband. "We don't even need a cook on the *Lady Judi* because Basc is so good at—"

"How much do we give you per book?" Gump asked him.

Les eased himself toward the large galley refrigerator. "\$15,000 a book."

"That isn't much, is it, Basc?" Judi said.

"We'll up it to \$20,000," Gump said. "I would like a small favor, however. When I turn Iris's pudgy remains over to the cops, don't go muttering anything about murder."

Les was looking inside the refrigerator. "No lemons?"

"You're not in danger of scurvy," Gump told him.

"We have some in the saloôn icebox." Judi scratched gracefully at her nutbrown stomach. "If you really want a lemon you can go over—"

"Nobody can be that anxious for a lemon."

"Plenty of radishes though." Les was squatting, poking into the vegetable bins.

"I absolutely hate radishes," said Judi. "I think I must be—what do they call it—allergic or something."

"Nobody can be allergic to radishes." Gump reached up for one of the copper skillets dangling overhead.

Les pressed his finger into the misty plastic bag containing the radishes and sniffed. It wasn't exactly the same smell he'd noted in the dead woman's cabin. Shutting the refrigerator, he stood up. "Maybe you ought to notify the Coast Guard, Bascom."

"Hooey," said Gump. "The Westport police know and love me. We'll give the body to them."

"He's really a very compassionate man," said Judi as Les went toward the doorway.

Tony Golem groaned. "C'mon, Les, I don't want to hear of it," the editor said, slouching down further in the deckchair. The midmorning sun was splashing at the black lenses of his sunglasses and at his handsome, puffy at the moment, face. "I have been known to romance an unappealing lady now and then to gain my selfish ends. Iris was a first-rate agent, despite looking like a disgruntled bloodhound, and I'd have liked her to handle the big breakthrough novel I'm working on but—"

"Were you in her cabin last night?" asked Les, who was perched on the arm of the chair next to his editor.

"Lord, no," said Golem, lighting a fresh cigarette and guarding the match against the sea wind. "From about eleven on I was in oblivion, or one of the suburbs thereof."

Rubbing at his nose as the smoke came spiraling at him, Les said, "You were drinking with her in the saloon last night."

"In the saloon only, old buddy." He took a heavy drag on the cigarette. "Why is your nose making those bunny-rabbit quivers?"

"That aftershave you always use," said Les. "Smells like Christmas trees and old boots."

"Why, bless you for noticing. It's called Irish Heather and it's guaranteed to remind all and sundry of the fields and fens of the old sod wherein."

"You always splash it all over yourself."

"I use it sparingly, but I do prefer it to my own natural musky odor. You really are getting preoccupied with smells, Lester."

"How drunk was Iris when you left her?"

"She left us," answered Golem. "Went tottering off to her cabin about ten-thirty, very much under the influence of demon booze. Had I been in somewhat better shape, and able to control both my shapely lower limbs, I'd have escorted her home, just to make sure she didn't topple overboard."

"She was too heavy for that."

Golem lifted his dark glasses and stared at Les with wrinkle-rimmed eyes. "Listen, old buddy, why don't you go along with Gump on this? It's a suicide. You can use that extra five thou per book, especially if you're going to wed with lovely Laura."

"Yeah, I suppose I ought to, but—"

"Watch out," cautioned Golem. "It's those butts that lead men on to ruin."

"Did you ever see anyone die from scurvy?" asked Charles Lund.

"Not recently," admitted Les, settling into the wicker chair opposite his fellow writer.

"I imagine it'd be pretty darn ghastly," said Lund, who was a jovial-looking pudgy man of forty-one. He was sitting at the edge of his unmade bunk. "Not as bad as succumbing to the black plague, but I already used that in *Worms*."

"Charlie, there's been a real killing onboard here. What I—"

"Don't ask me to look at Iris," said Lund. "I can't handle death. Most successful horror writers can't. Poe, Lovecraft, Nolan. Squeamish, all of them."

Absently Les got up, sniffing. "Why do you have lemons in your cabin?"

"Why else? I suck on them to keep from getting scurvy."

Les went to the bowl of them on the little desk. He leaned down to sniff. "Not quite right," he said quietly.

"Sure, they are. Lemons are the choice cure for—"

"Did you see Iris last night?"

"At dinner." He plucked a pack of cigarettes off the bunkside table. "She was at my table, along with Tony Golem and Larry Kolvig. I don't know why Larry bothers to come to dinner, he's such a healthfood nut he won't touch most—"

"Iris was your agent." Les picked up a lemon, tossed it in the air.

"Damn good one too. Don't let that drop, I don't like to eat them when they're mooshy."

"She's Larry's agent too." Les returned, after three more tosses, the lemon to its nest.

Lund lit his cigarette. "Did you ever see anyone die of cancer?" He shuddered. "I really ought to quit. It's my morbid side keeps me—Listen, Les, I'll tell you something but don't mention to Gump I told you this. I'm hoping to get a three-book contract out of him for this new horror series, *The Leech*. This is the one about the lustful vampire who—"

"You were going to confide something."

"This is only hearsay." He took an uneasy puff on his unfiltered cigarette. "I never exactly liked Iris, but she was a very effective agent. Thing is, lately I've been hearing that she was getting kickbacks from some of her clients. She already takes fifteen percent anyway, but with certain people—well, she had managed to find out a few things."

"She was blackmailing them?"

After coughing into his hand and snuffing out his cigarette Lund replied, "So I heard."

"All afternoon?" inquired Laura. She was leaning on the white railing, staring out at the blue Atlantic.

"Until I talk to everyone," he said.

"Makes a lonely trip for me," she said. "And from what you tell me, Gump doesn't much want you fooling with this. Besides, Les, it isn't as though you liked Iris. I can see avenging the death of someone you're fond of, but a frump like—"

"I have to." His fingers tapped the deck railing.

"You already admitted your poor nose is out of whack. You're probably smelling things that aren't really—"

"I know I'm right. Iris didn't kill herself, she didn't write that suicide note."

"I suppose if Gump does dump you off your one-legged cowboy series you—"

"One-armed."

"Whatever. If he fires you, you can come over and do an important book for me at Astute House."

"Something about a one-legged cowboy maybe."

"You have it in you to do something good, I know it," she insisted. "Maybe I don't read every word you bat out, but I love you. Nobody I really love can be a bad writer."

"True," he agreed, kissing her. After a moment he moved free. "I'll try to see you for dinner."

"I'll sulk back in my own cabin until then."

"I didn't know you were hunting for me." Larry Kolvig was seated at a table in the yacht's small library. He was a thin man of forty-seven, pale.

Les sat across from him. "I was in your cabin earlier."

Kolvig shut the manila folder in front of him and capped his felt-tip pen. "We're friends, Les, but not that close," he said in his pale voice. "I don't think I like the idea of your prowling in my—"

"You brought a lot of your own food along."

"Most people nowadays are killing themselves with—That's got nothing to do with the fact you broke into my cabin."

"Picked the lock, won't even show," said Les. "You packed several little plastic bags of sprouts."

"Sprouted grains and seeds are terrific sources of—"

"Interesting things about vegetable seeds that you sprout," said Les. "They smell like the vegetables, yet not quite. That's what puzzled me. I got radishes, but then the real thing didn't exactly match. Radish *sprouts*, though, are exactly right."

Frowning, Kolvig said, "Are you having some sort of breakdown? What do radish sprouts have to do with—"

"You'd been eating them before you visited Iris last night. The odor lingers."

"That's ridiculous," the writer said, "and besides I wasn't—"

"You'd also washed your hands with that lemon-scented soap you use,"

Les told him. "When you typed the fake suicide note, both scents clung to the keys."

Kolvig chuckled. "This is what Lassie would sound like if she could speak, I guess. You don't really think any rational police officer would listen to all this lunacy about smelly typewriter keys, do you?"

"They'll wonder why Iris washed out her glass and her whisky bottle after she used it," he said. "They'll maybe decide, as I did, that you washed them out after the pills you'd dumped in her scotch killed her. If somebody actually tested the bottle, you didn't want them finding any trace of the sleeping capsules you'd dissolved."

"It was a suicide," said Kolvig. "She wasn't blackmailing me, nor—"

"You're anticipating. I hadn't mentioned the blackmail thing yet." Les jumped to his feet and moved around the table. "Don't!"

"What are you talking about?" Kolvig's hand had been moving toward his jacket pocket.

"Don't pull out the gun you've got in there."

"I don't have a—"

"Sure; you do. I can smell it."

Laura fastened the second earring. "Larry Kolvig confessed?"

Les was pacing her cabin, sniffing absently. "Hum?"

The young woman left her bathroom mirror, smiling at him. "I'll be ready for dinner in a minute, Les, don't be fretful. I was asking you if Larry Kolvig confessed."

"Yeah, to me and later to Gump," he answered. "Then he wrote it all out in his best prose style, and signed it."

"Iris was blackmailing him?"

"Taking \$100,000 of his annual \$200,000."

"What did she have on him?"

He took a few steps toward her neatly made bunk. "Mainly the fact that he isn't Larry Kolvig," he said. "Seems some fifteen years ago he wandered away from a prison out in California where he'd just begun serving a fairly long sentence for several counts of armed robbery. Years later, long after he'd changed his name and become a successful writer, he made the slight mistake of confiding in Iris. Being Iris, she checked out his story to make sure it was true and then started hitting him for money."

"Pretty good motive, although he was dopey to trust her in the first

place," said Laura. "There was one thing that doesn't fit in though. The smell of cigarette smoke in her cabin. Larry doesn't smoke."

He said, "I think that was there because somebody else, I'm not exactly sure who, discovered the body before I did. But kept quiet. Sometimes it's tough to tie every single—"

"Actually I'm very proud of you," Laura said. "Initially I kidded you, but you really did solve everything. That's splendid, Les."

"Now we can spend the rest of this cruise, what's left of it, together." He was standing alongside her bunk, rubbing at the side of his nose. "You must've had a lonely afternoon."

She shrugged one shoulder. "I roamed the deck for a while, then just came back here and read. Busman's holiday. Little did I know you were risking your life while I was—what is it you smell now? Such a face you're making."

He turned away from the bed. "Irish heather," he said.

"What?"

"Nothing, never mind." He took her arm and led her to the door.

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She had made three attempts to kill her husband . . .

THE WILLOW WOMAN

by
**RON
BUTLER**



She was known to her admirers as The Willow Woman. Tall, with slender hips and shining shoulder-length black hair, she had the poise, grace, and suppleness of the green willows that line the rivers and streams, bending with the subtle breezes and whispering at night of forbidden romances in the land of dragon-backed mountains.

The face she most often presented was one of casual charm, education, and sophistication, but this contrived mask concealed another, sinister

aspect of her being—a hardened contempt for all values other than her own.

She entered my life and that of Police Inspector Toshihiko Ueki with her attempts to kill her husband. The introduction came on an evening when I was rearranging some rocks in my garden. Noriko, my wife, called me to the telephone. It was her father, Inspector Ueki, and he asked me if I could meet him at Nakamura's bar.

"Something extremely bizarre has developed," he explained, "and I would appreciate it if you would come and talk to one of my friends."

Noriko, who never objected to my infrequent late hours with her father, laid out a change of clothes for me while I cleaned up. I walked to the highway near our house and caught a taxi.

Ueki was sitting at the bar with another man, and both stood as I entered.

"Ah," Ueki said, "Sam Brent, allow me to introduce Professor Masao Okamoto of Okayama University."

We bowed, shook hands, and sat down. Nakamura greeted me from behind the counter, reached up to a shelf, brought down my personal bottle of imported bourbon, and poured generous measures for all of us.

We made the small polite conversation that serves as a preamble to serious discussion in Japan. Okamoto told me he specialized in western literature and had just published a new translation of a Thomas Wolfe novel into Japanese.

Ueki reached for the bowl of peanuts and addressed me. "Actually, Sam, Professor Okamoto has encountered a problem. I've suggested that you might be able to aid him."

I freshened the professor's drink. "I'll be pleased to help any way I can."

Okamoto stared at the counter, embarrassed. "There are two difficulties, Mr. Brent, and I believe they are related. The first is that my wife, Miyako, has become obsessed with the idea that our Japanese mode of family life is antiquated and restrictive. The second is that she says I have become a burden to be eliminated in any way possible."

"Professor Okamoto, this sounds like a police matter to me. I'm only a businessman."

Okamoto smiled politely. "But an unusual businessman, Mr. Brent. You are a westerner, yet you have lived in Japan long enough to under-

stand our language and customs. You might be able to provide me with some insight as to why Miyako speaks with such disrespect of our social heritage. This insight, I think, would help me understand her reason for wanting me dead."

Ueki interrupted. "The situation is quite delicate, Sam. I have known the professor for years and trust him absolutely. However, we have no proof that would satisfy a court, and Miyako's family is wealthy—one of the wealthiest in Okayama. We must move with caution. If the professor does not mind I would like him to repeat what has happened to him so far."

Okamoto proceeded to tell me that three attempts had been made to kill him. On one occasion he had spotted slivers of glass in his food. His wife, he said, had claimed it was an accident, the result of a water tumbler broken by the maid. Sometime after that he had awakened early one morning to the sharp sweet smell of gas and had immediately opened the doors and windows. He found that a rubber-hose connection to a water heater in the kitchen had pulled loose—or been pulled loose. Then just recently he had come home from a late meeting at the university and was preparing for his bath. He had removed his slippers and opened the sliding door leading to the sunken tub when he saw a *mamushi*—viper—on the tiles.

When he asked Miyako how the viper came to be in the bath, she had laughed, maintaining that it must have crawled through an open window.

Unlikely, I thought. From Ueki's expression I knew that he was thinking the same thing. I declined another drink and asked the inspector what he thought we should do.

"We think you should go with us to meet Miyako. She will be at home now."

I consented, and Nakamura called a taxi for us.

She was beautiful rather than lovely, like a rare work of Bizen pottery cherished for its artistic value. Although Okamoto had not called prior to our arrival, she was dressed elegantly, wearing an expensive ankle-length skirt and a high-necked blouse trimmed with lace.

Okamoto introduced us and she extended her hand in the western fashion.

The living room was an exotic amalgam of East and West common to many modern Japanese homes. It contained a piano, phonograph, several

upholstered chairs, and a coffee table flanked by two vinyl-covered sofas. On top of a cabinet sat a glass case containing two female dolls dressed in the fashion of Nineteenth Century Paris. An elaborate calligraphy scroll was hung from one wall. Another wall contained a niche for a Buddhist shrine.

We took seats around the coffee table and Miyako called for her maid, Etsuko, to bring bottles of brandy, ice, and glasses. The maid complied with an ill-humored grunt and Miyako made a show of pouring the drinks, each movement of her hands a miniature ballet.

A short while later Ueki looked at his watch and pleaded a pressing engagement. Okamoto said he also had a meeting, but that I should remain until he returned. I thought Miyako's eyes revealed a glint of pleasure at the news. When the two men left to await a taxi in front of the house she refilled our glasses and dismissed the servant for the night.

She began to probe for information. Who was Ueki-san? My father-in-law. Ah, so I was married. She laughed it off as a minor matter. What kind of business did I have in Japan? Manager of an American firm specializing in bilingual computer printout systems. Had I known her husband long? I told her no, I'd just met him.

"And what about you, *okusan*?" I countered. "Is Okayama your home?"

"Unfortunately." She spoke in a measured, concise dialect. "It is such a dreary city, don't you agree? But I was educated abroad—in Europe and in your own country, Mr. Brent." She took a Black Russian cigarette from a flat gold case and I picked up a book of matches and struck one for her.

"So gallant, Mr. Brent. Men in Japan have no manners." It was true that most Japanese men wouldn't light a cigarette for a woman, or open a door for one.

I protested mildly. "Your husband seems very much a gentleman."

Her eyes became totally dark, reflecting no light. "My husband is a drab uninteresting man." She exhaled smoke. "You, Mr. Brent, are both interesting and handsome. I find your combination of red hair and blue eyes exciting."

I felt my face redden. She noticed and laughed—a sharp dry laugh with no humor. "Really, Mr. Brent, it's ridiculous for men and women not to express pleasure in each other's company."

I steered a course to less dangerous conversation.

When Okamoto returned shortly after ten o'clock Miyako invited me to a dinner party the next night. Okamoto urged me to accept.

Although I objected, Miyako insisted on driving me home in her car. She was one of the few people I had met in Japan brazen enough to risk driving after drinking.

Ueki was waiting for me, sitting at the kitchen table with Noriko.

"What did you learn, Sam?" he asked.

I let out a long breath, hugged Noriko, and sat down. "For one thing, Toshihiko, that's the most atypical Japanese woman I have met."

The inspector laughed. "Extreme wealth has its own nationality, Sam. Does she disturb you?"

I admitted it. "There's nothing she wouldn't do to reach her personal goals, but I can't give you any concrete reason for the attempts on her husband's life."

I told them of the invitation to dinner.

"Maybe you can learn something by going, Sam," Ueki said. He put his hand on Noriko's arm. "Please do not object because Sam accepted. It is at my request, as well as that of Okamoto-san."

Noriko looked at me. "*Kano-jo wa kawaii desuka?*" Is she beautiful? "*Sukoshi,*" I hedged. A little bit.

Ueki tilted back his head and laughed. "It is time for me to go home, Sam. I am sure you will be able to work this out with my daughter. After all, in Japan the husband rules the roost."

"Do you believe that?" Noriko asked after her father left.

I tried to change the subject.

Professor Okamoto met me when I arrived at his home for dinner.

"I will be leaving early again, Mr. Brent, and I must advise you that my wife is surrounded by people. Perhaps you will be able to elicit some information from her later in the evening."

The living room was filled with men in their middle and late twenties, all smoking, drinking, and talking loudly among themselves. "Her friends," the professor explained, a note of sadness in his voice. "If you are like me you will find them rude and empty-headed, but perhaps I am too prejudiced."

Okamoto took me around the room, and I shook hands with Shimizu, Kobayashi, Kawanaka, Fujiwara, Hashimoto, and Takahashi. Kobayashi

volunteered the information that he spoke some English, but I assured him I was comfortable with Japanese. He suggested we sit down for a while and said that Miyako would join us as soon as she finished her bath.

Kobayashi was drinking rapidly, as were the others, and his face was flushed. His mannerisms were exaggerated, but he was friendly—assuming, I supposed, that I was a new member of Miyako's inner circle.

"All of us," he confided, "call her The Willow Woman because of her unusual beauty."

"Where do you know her from?" I asked casually.

Kobayashi drained his glass and belched softly. "I met her at a nightclub in Osaka." He glanced around the room at his companions. "She likes the modern night life. Most of us met her that way."

"Doesn't her husband object?"

"Okamoto-sensei? He has his head buried in his books most of the time. And, anyway, he'd be afraid to insult any of Miyako's friends."

"Where did the professor and his wife meet?"

He half filled his glass again. "It was a *miai* marriage." I understood. Their marriage, as is still frequent in Japan, had been arranged by a *nakodo*, a professional marriage broker.

"Then her parents approved of it?"

He laughed again. "They hoped a marriage would tame her, but they were mistaken."

There was a hush in the room. I looked around and saw Miyako emerge from the sliding doors leading to the bath, a house kimono pulled loosely around her. She favored the young men with smiles. Then she spotted me.

"Ah, Akage-san." Mr. Redhead. Everyone turned toward me chortling, and I felt the blood rise in my cheeks. This doubled the mirth, but it ended abruptly when Miyako came to me barefoot and patted my face. I was, they saw, to be a favorite. She bowed and retired to her room to dress for dinner.

The meal was a display of conspicuous consumption—a deliberate overabundance of expensive foods and wines.

In Japan, beef is purchased by the gram, not the pound, but that night Miyako served thick cuts of top sirloin accompanied by imported European wines, tempura-style shrimp and chicken, and whole broiled *tai*, red snapper. It was a night for knife and fork, not *hashi*—chopsticks.

Everyone competed to keep Miyako's glass filled or to light her cigarettes, and I sensed that she was happy only when surrounded by the fawning male sycophants.

Okamoto sat quietly through the meal, eating and drinking sparingly, then excused himself. No one paid any attention to his departure. I walked with him to the entranceway. He slipped on his shoes, then turned to face me. "Soon, Mr. Brent, the young men will be drunk. Do not lose your temper, and bide your time."

His prediction was accurate. The conversation became crude, slipping into the blurred accents and harsh grammar used by men of equivalent social class. Miyako presided over the incoherent chatter, nodding occasionally. One by one, they staggered away from the table, going to various rooms to sleep off their stupor. Finally I was alone with Miyako. She smiled at me provocatively. "Shall we go to the living room?"

"A pleasure," I dissembled, emboldened by the wine. She sat down next to me on one of the sofas.

"Tell me, Mr. Brent," she teased, "do you believe in the liberation of women?"

I studied a wall tapestry. "I haven't thought about it much."

"You're quite evasive."

"I was being honest, Mrs. Okamoto."

"Please call me Miyako."

"Sure, and why don't you call me Sam?" I felt a twinge of guilt.

She moistened her lips and smiled. "Do you find me different?"

"*Hai, chigau desu.*" Yes, you're different.

She put her hand on my neck. "We'll be good friends, Sam. We have many things to talk about."

"I hope so, Miyako." I put more ice into her glass. "The better I know you, the more curious I am about your husband. He seems so traditional, but you're a woman of the world."

She allowed me to light another cigarette for her. "That man," she scorned. "He's a mouse. I have suggested a divorce at least once a day for the past year."

"Apparently you have little in common."

She nodded vigorously. "He is hopelessly old-fashioned, chained by obsolete values. He would rather suffer humiliation than consent to a divorce." She leaned close to me and I smelled the enticing fragrance of

her perfume. "I'll tell you a secret, Sam." She paused, savoring the thought.

"Yes?"

"Divorce isn't the only way to eliminate a fool. And when that day comes I will be free to show full appreciation of my friends."

I poured another drink for her and put on a stage smile. "What other ways do you know of being free again?"

She ignored the drink. "I am not a stupid woman, Sam. I have thought of a perfect way to remove that man from my life."

I wanted to learn more, but at that moment Kobayashi and several of his friends returned, ready to resume their drinking.

I told Miyako that I had an important business meeting in the morning. She telephoned for a taxi and stood close to me in the entranceway while I waited for its arrival.

Most of the following day was occupied by business. Goto-san, my chief clerk, had several orders for computer system installations and it was late in the day before I completed the paperwork. I called Inspector Ueki at his office and suggested we meet with Okamoto at my home that evening.

They arrived while I was helping Noriko with the dishes. The four of us took seats in the family room. I related what had happened at the dinner party and both Okamoto and Ueki looked concerned.

Ueki stood up and began pacing the floor. "From what you have said, Sam, it is my opinion that she has devised another scheme to eliminate my friend here." He stopped and stood before Okamoto. "Has she given any indication of what she might do?"

"Her abuse has increased," Okamoto said, "but she has said nothing specific."

I thought back to my conversation with Miyako. "She said she's come up with a perfect way to get rid of Professor Okamoto, but I didn't have a chance to draw her out."

Okamoto said, "Mr. Brent, it seems that Miyako is fascinated by you because you have presented her with a new challenge. You have not rushed to become a new conquest, and she will spare no effort to add you to her collection."

"I agree," Ueki said. "We must be patient now and wait for her to make the next move. If we are lucky, she will disclose it to Sam. But you

must be very careful, Okamoto-san. I do not think she will wait much longer."

"That may be true," Okamoto said, "but I still fail to understand why Miyako spurns our traditional Japanese family ways, and why she feels that she must be rid of me."

Noriko spoke up, softly and politely. "Please excuse my intrusion, but I think you have the answers to those questions."

We looked at her, and she continued. "Tradition to your wife, Professor Okamoto, means restraint, and that is something she has never learned. Over the centuries, we Japanese have learned that we cannot survive in these crowded islands unless we obey certain rules of respect and politeness. But great wealth has blinded your wife to this necessity."

Noriko blushed at her boldness, but, encouraged by our respectful attention, she went on. "It is not only Japanese culture that she pretends to detest, but any form of responsibility. She answers only to her whims. And that is the source of your danger, Professor. Because you live by the rules of traditional respect, she sees you as weak, and she wishes to cut away the weak part of her life."

Ueki regarded his daughter with awe. "*Jodan desho!* Your mother will be proud to learn how you have used your mind, Noriko." He grinned at me. "Sam is quite safe in your care."

On Wednesday afternoon of the following week, Goto-san ushered Miyako into my office, then withdrew with several backward glances.

"Am I disrupting your work, Sam?"

"No, it's good to see you again."

"I am unable to remain long, but I wish to extend an invitation. Tomorrow night, will you be one of my guests? I am going with my husband and friends to a special restaurant in Kobe, where one of the finest chefs in Japan will prepare a great delicacy—*fugu*. Have you sampled this food, Sam?"

I told her I hadn't.

"Good. A taxi will be at your home at six."

She left before I could answer. Goto-san waited a few moments, then came into the office, his round, owlsh face creased by a huge smile.

"Your wife might be jealous if she saw that woman, Mr. Brent."

I tried to look serious. "It's all business, Goto-san. Purely business."

"*Mochiron.*" Of course. He backed out of the office, still smiling.

I got tied up with business and didn't get around to calling Inspector Ueki until the next morning to tell him about the latest invitation. I was told that he had gone to the neighboring city of Kurashiki on official business and was not expected to return until late in the afternoon. I wrote a note for Ueki and asked Goto-san to make sure he received it.

It was almost 5:00 when I arrived home and I bathed, shaved, and dressed hurriedly. A taxi pulled up to the house just as I straightened the knot in my tie. I shouted a brief farewell to Noriko and left.

The taxi-driver pulled the lever opening the left rear door for me, then went directly to the Okamoto home, where Miyako and the professor welcomed me. Kobayashi and several of the other men I had met were waiting for us at the Okayama Station.

Miyako opened her purse and removed an envelope containing reserved-seat tickets for the Shinkansen bullet train that would speed us to Kobe.

We jostled our way through the throng, reaching the platform minutes before the long silver train whispered to a stop.

To my surprise, Miyako sat by her husband. "This," she promised, "will be a memorable evening for all of us. My husband must think I have been foolish, and I wish to show him how much I really think of him." Okamoto's face was expressionless.

After the train left the station, the young men got up and went to the restaurant car for drinks. I remained in my seat, watching the towns zip by and wondering about Miyako's behavior.

It was too early for dining when we arrived at Kobe, so Miyako arranged for two taxis and we went to one of her exclusive bars, the Club Royale. Two attractive young women dressed in western clothing welcomed her effusively, and we all sat at the polished hardwood bar and ordered drinks.

I was seated next to Okamoto, and while the others chatted with the women behind the bar I turned my head slightly and whispered to him. "*Shimpai desu.*" I'm worried.

He continued to look straight ahead. "With reason, I think. I do not know what she has in mind, but perhaps we can take comfort in the fact that we are with so many people."

Maybe, I thought.

Kobayashi, tossing off his drink, suggested a game of pachinko. The

idea was received enthusiastically by the others and the bar women directed us to a parlor within walking distance.

It was crowded with men delaying their return home from a day's work in the hope of winning a few prizes.

Miyako took some thousand-yen banknotes from her purse and went to the cashier, purchasing plastic buckets filled with heavy steel balls. We walked down the rows of pachinko devices, which look like upright pinball machines, and chose empty places, seating ourselves on the stools in front of the games. The steel balls are put into the machine, then flipped upward by spring-loaded levers. If they hit the right wheels and other gadgets on their downward journey, the machine releases varying quantities of the steel balls to the player. At the end of the game, the cashier weighs them to determine the nature of the prizes.

I won six packs of Cherry cigarettes, which I gave to Okamoto. As we left the pachinko parlor, I began to relax slightly. So far, Miyako had done nothing unusual.

The Restaurant of the Two Cats faced a busy thoroughfare. Paper lanterns were hung over the door and the front window displayed a wide variety of realistic plastic food-models representing offerings on the menu, a form of advertising which is a distinct art form in Japan.

Two middle-aged women in kimonos met us at the entranceway, bowing deferentially. We removed our shoes and donned felt slippers, which were in turn removed at the entrance of the private tatami-mat banquet room. Heated ceramic bottles of sake and cold beer were brought. Miyako filled her husband's sake cup first, then repeated the ritual for the other guests.

I sat crosslegged at one end of the table. Miyako was at the other end with her husband to her right.

I turned to Kobayashi. "If you don't mind, can you tell me something about this *fugu* we're going to eat?"

A look of surprise crossed his face. "It is hard to believe you do not know. The *fugu* is a pufferfish." He emptied his cup of sake. "The remarkable thing about it, aside from the exquisite taste, is the fact that it is poisonous if not prepared correctly."

There was a flutter in my stomach. "I don't follow all of that."

Kobayashi poured more sake for both of us. "There are special licensed chefs who are the only people allowed to cook *fugu*. I believe that the

liver contains the poison, which is one of the deadliest in the world." He grinned broadly. "This may be our last meal."

The paper-paneled doors slid open and a tall, lean man wearing a white chef's hat entered. It was Inspector Ueki. In his hands he carried a platter of steaming fish.

"For you, madam," he said, placing the platter in front of Miyako.

Her face hardened and her eyes half closed. "Why are you here? Where is the chef, Furuta-san?"

Ueki's dark eyes glittered. "I regret that Furuta-san has been arrested. You were not told, but I am a police inspector, and the chef was considerate enough, under questioning, to mention the large sum of money you paid him to prepare a death dish for your husband." He stared down at her. "Perhaps this is the very fish he was going to serve your husband, Mrs. Okamoto. Would you care to sample it for us?"

She snatched the platter from Ueki's hands and flung it in his face, then ran from the room. By the time I got up from the floor cushion Ueki was jamming his feet into his shoes at the entranceway. When I reached the street in my stocking feet, Miyako was nowhere in sight and Ueki was getting into a police cruiser with two uniformed men in front. They waited for me, then pulled out into the traffic, lights flashing and siren wailing.

"Where do you think she went?" I asked, out of breath.

Ueki pulled the chef's hat from his head and mopped his face with it. "I'm betting she'll go directly to the Kobe Station and try to return to her parents' home in Okayama."

The officer driving braked to a halt in front of the station, and we ran past the slow-moving escalators to a stairway, rushing past startled travelers as we took the steps two and three at a time.

I saw the glaring lights of the approaching bullet train at the same time we glimpsed Miyako at the far end of the platform.

Ueki shouted at her, but it was useless, she was too far away. We were forced to watch helplessly as she stood calmly until the slowing train was just meters away, then looked back at us with an expression of aloof contempt, and jumped into its path.

I turned away quickly.

The Restaurant of the Two Cats was filled with uniformed police when we returned.

The chef, Furuta, had admitted he was one of The Willow Woman's

admirers. He disclosed that he and others had conspired with Miyako in the previous attempts on Okamoto's life.

"All of them," Ueki said, "will spend many years in prison."

Professor Okamoto, pale and shaken, said he would remain in Kobe overnight to arrange for the return of Miyako's body to Okayama.

"I am grateful for my life," he said, "but I did not wish for anything like this to befall Miyako."

Ueki placed a hand on his friend's shoulder. "It was her destiny, Okamoto-san, and now you must resume your life as best you can."

The last west-bound Shinkansen moved swiftly through the night, carrying us home.

Ueki opened a new pack of cigarettes and removed one. "It is strange, Sam, how fate intervened in this case."

"What did fate have to do with it?"

He lit the cigarette and inhaled deeply. "If I had not returned to Okayama in time to get your note about going to a *fugu* restaurant Miyako might have succeeded in killing her husband. Even the best of licensed chefs make occasional errors in preparing *fugu* and it would have been almost impossible to prove it if we had not become involved. When I read your note, Miyako's intent became clear. As there are relatively few places which handle *fugu*, I asked an old friend of mine on the Kobe Police Force to check them out for reservations in Miyako's name. I have no jurisdiction in Kobe, but my friend allowed me to participate unofficially."

The inspector dropped his cigarette into an empty soft-drink can. "Fate also intervened when we arrived at the restaurant only minutes before an improperly prepared fish was ready to be served to Okamoto. Furuta confessed readily enough when we insisted that he eat the fish himself."

I asked Ueki if that was the poisoned fish he had taken to Miyako on the platter.

"No, we kept that one as evidence." He paused and smiled. "My actions were a bit theatrical, but you know how we Japanese love a moment of high drama."

"How could Miyako be sure her husband would receive the poisoned portion?"

"She instructed the chef to serve Okamoto first personally—a mark of honor for a distinguished guest and a false gesture of reconciliation."

I leaned back in my seat and stretched. "A lot's happened since that evening when I was working in my garden."

"Yes, and that reminds me, Sam. You did a magnificent job of rearranging the rocks in your garden. I was wondering if you would mind helping me with my own garden when we have time."

"My pleasure, Toshihiko."

He clasped his hands in delight and chuckled.

"What's so funny?"

"Now, Sam, I will be able to boast to my friends that I have an American gardener."



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THE WILLOW WOMAN

63

When there was fast money to be made, Peacocke was a coiled spring . . .

A BIRD OF SOME KIND

by
**GARY
ALEXANDER**



Earle Peacocke never forgets a face. Never. Just ask him. Faces to Peacocke are fingerprints, snowflakes. Disguises, plastic surgery, the erosion of years—no matter. Peacocke sees you once, he records you forever.

Now, for instance, while having lunch, stroking a client, Peacocke is certain that Allie Koenig himself is perched on a bar stool, sipping up margaritas. Peacocke excuses himself, goes to the cigarette machine even though he has half a pack on the table. There's better light from there,

a better angle. He confirms the sighting: Allie Koenig, fugitive killer and bank robber. Lighter hair, he notices, and a moustache to match. And those glasses. Probably flat lenses, something Koenig picked up at a novelty store, then scissored off the rubber nose.

No class, no savoir-faire. But that's consistent for Koenig, who is decidedly lacking in cool, not at all laid back. A visceral, impulsive, cruel sociopath, Peacocke recalls, a creature not many generations removed from forebears who walked on all fours. An animal, yes, Peacocke thinks, returning to his client, but a prized one carrying a \$25,000 bounty.

Peacocke is short and lean, with tinted glasses and a perm. He wears Brooks Brothers and cowboy boots. When there is money to be made, fast money, he is a coiled spring. Pure energy. He sits down, snapping his fingers, wondering what to do about Allie Koenig.

His client, a porky extruded-aluminum wholesaler named Mendenhall, gives him a nudge. "Like you were saying, how exactly are municipal bonds going to work out when I sell them, capital-gainswise?"

Peacocke, of Earle Peacocke and Associates, runs a one-man show from his spare bedroom. He is an investment counselor who offers various tax shelters. He attracts prospects who are not interested in long-term this or that, or retirement nest-eggs. They've got some loose cash laying around and want relief from the IRS *now*.

"How about it?" Mendenhall asks again.

Peacocke looks at Mendenhall but neither sees nor hears him. Allie Koenig is ordering another drink. When was it, six or seven weeks ago? Peacocke was in Oakland, fidgeting and pacing in his hotel room, waiting until it was time to see Abbott and fence those securities, gilt-edged stuff that even with a healthy discount would perpetuate his juggling act a while longer and keep him out of hot water.

He'd had the television on and the lead story caught his attention. Allie Koenig, a recent alumnus of Soledad, was practicing his old craft of bank robbery—nine Bay Area banks in three days, they reported, with a gross take well into six digits. It was more a rampage, really. An ambitious young assistant branch manager trying to macho himself into a promotion had taken a round in the chest from Koenig's .38 and died on the operating table.

Then the mug shots, face-front and profile, images recorded permanently in Peacocke's brain cells. And the obligatory warning—considered armed and extremely dangerous, et cetera. They also flashed a reward

poster. Twenty-five grand anted up by a local banking association for information leading to the arrest and conviction of Mr. Koenig.

"I've heard silver is looking good," Mendenhall persists. "Metals, they say, are on the upswing, and there are ways to keep the tax people's noses out of it."

Peacocke is studying Koenig. One foot is on the carpet and his glass stem is in the air. Damn, he's leaving!

Peacocke pulls free of Mendenhall and gets up. This dum-dum is window-shopping anyway; he decides, cadging rare beef and martinis. Peacocke, a sales professional with experience in vinyl siding and encyclopedias, has learned how to read a mooch. And Koenig, a lumbering giant of a man, is already turning the corner. No contest!

"Your best bet, Frank," Peacocke says, tossing his last pair of twenties on the table, "is the Christmas Club at the First National. Have a nice day."

He charges out the front door and sees Koenig pull out of the lot in a clunker and head south on Trenton Avenue. Peacocke sprints to his BMW, which is parked a block away. The bank that holds the paper on it is *very* interested in its whereabouts, so this spotting of Allie Koenig is more than merely fortuitous, it's a godsend.

My karma is finally turning itself around, Peacocke thinks as he lurches from the curb in pursuit. It holds as he speeds down a parallel street and sees Koenig cross Fifth, still on Trenton, still southbound.

Peacocke catches up easily but lays off, one block back. Koenig leads him into a seedy part of town that Peacocke has no other reason to ever visit. Pawn shops, grungy bars, shabby hotels. Here again, no class. It figures.

Koenig parks on cracked asphalt adjacent to something called AMES FURNISHED ROOMS. Peacocke cruises by, U-turns at a service station, watches Koenig enter the front door of the two-story stucco monstrosity, then drives home.

He has formulated a game plan. He will *not* notify the law and trust them to do their duty and authorize the reward. Some underpaid cop might grab it for himself. No way. To be certain, Peacocke will deliver the prize in person.

His palms perspire and stick to the steering wheel and its genuine-leather cover. He must go home and get his gun. He must apprehend Koenig and march him into the nearest precinct. Oh, Lordy! But the

risk—those twenty-five biggies—how it will buy time, how it will cover investments for clients turned rancid, some of which they no longer own.

Earle and Peg Peacocke's condo has a nifty view of the lake. You can enjoy the sight of ducks and their offspring bobbing around on it if you care to look. Peacocke has no choice. He parks in the public lot with the joggers and fishermen. The bank and their poachers have never caught onto that.

He races inside. Peg is in the hot tub on the deck, a glass of white wine at her side. She's either bombed or meditating; her eyes are closed, her knees tucked up. At least, he thinks, in this mode she's not on the loose with the checkbook and credit cards.

"Where the hell's the gun?" Peacocke demands. "Where did we leave it?"

"Mmm. The armoire. In a lower drawer if I recall. Why?"

Peacocke ransacks the drawers, finds the weapon under several albums of dried wildflowers caked with dust. It is a hobby Peg has long forgotten.

The .25 automatic is cute, like a baby cobra. It is nickel-plated and has fake pearl grips. Peacocke manages to snap in the clip and pull back the slide to chamber a round.

"O.K., where the hell's the permit? I can't be wandering around with this thing without the paperwork."

"Mmm, if I recall it's in your filing cabinet, in the lower drawer."

That it is. "I'll be back later," Peacocke yells from the door.

"From where?"

"I'm going to stick the gun in a guy's mouth and make twenty-five thou," Peacocke says to the blonde hair showing above the rim of the hot tub.

"That's nice," Pegs answers with a slight nod. "But please try not to be late. The Wilsons will be over around sevenish for backgammon."

I'll be more careful choosing my next wife (his fourth), Peacocke vows as he races down the stairs—I'll at the very least make certain she's a native of this planet.

Peacocke easily pinpoints Koenig's room number from the fly-specked mailboxes. Most carry names like Minnie or Agnes or Rupert—old geezers living on pensions. But Room 207 belongs to a K. Alley.

Peacocke goes up the steps and tiptoes to Room 207. Music inside; he's

still there. Now what? Only television actors slam their shoulders against doors and crash in, guns blazing. Not my style, Peacocke decides.

He stakes out Koenig from the fire stairs instead, hoping the fugitive will show consideration for a businessman with a busy schedule and not keep him there all day and night. He does, emerging only fifteen minutes later.

Peacocke takes a deep breath and rushes out, holding the tiny pistol with both hands to control his trembling. "Freeze, Koenig," he yells. "One false move and you're dead."

Koenig slowly turns to face Peacocke. Up close and personal, as they say, the man is even more menacing.

Koenig sizes up Peacocke and his weapon and breaks out in a contemptuous smirk. "What's goin' on, pal?"

"We're going to the nearest precinct," Peacocke says in a quavering voice. "That's what's going on."

"Hey, I know you," Koenig says. "I never forget a face. Where was it? Oh, yeah, Oakland a couple of months ago."

"No false moves," Peacocke warns, "or I'll, uh, waste you."

"Oakland, yeah, right," Koenig continues. "You was coming out of Abbott's just when I was going in. You didn't see me. I ducked aside till you got past. I was what you'd call hot then and didn't want to meet any new people, if you know what I mean. You were funny, all nervous like you are now, looking about as innocent as the Boston Strangler. So, anyway, I go up to Abbott with these packets of bills that got numbers in order, figuring the law got a line on them. Abbott made me a trade, taking himself a cut, and I asked him who the nerd was. He said it was some guy from out of town with some paper to unload. He even told me your name. What was it? A bird of some kind. I want to say turkey but that ain't it."

"Peacocke," Peacocke blurts.

"That's it," Koenig agrees, taking a step toward Peacocke.

"If we're going in, let's get on with it," Koenig continues. "But it's gonna be what you call your two-way street. They got plenty of bulls down there to listen. While you're telling your story, I'll tell mine."

Peacocke almost squeezes the trigger but cannot. There would be too much to explain. "Well, it would be counterproductive," he says. "A no-win situation for both of us."

"There you go," Koenig says in a fatherly tone. "But we can work

something out. You look like a sharp guy and I'm still carrying cash I can't spend. Put your piece away. We'll go out and have a cold one and talk some business."

A reasonable proposition, Peacocke thinks. The twenty-five thou is out the window, but there is a potential for profit here. Koenig is calm and marginally intelligent. Perhaps in a friendlier atmosphere Peacocke can explain the advantages of tax shelters to the man. He pockets his gun and extends a hand. "It seems we're birds of a feather, to an extent. Simpatico, eh?"

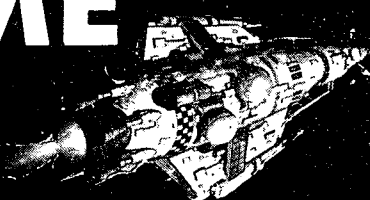
"Sure thing, pal," Koenig says, taking Peacocke's hand, pulling him into Room 207, and, drawing his own silenced weapon, shooting him square between the eyes.


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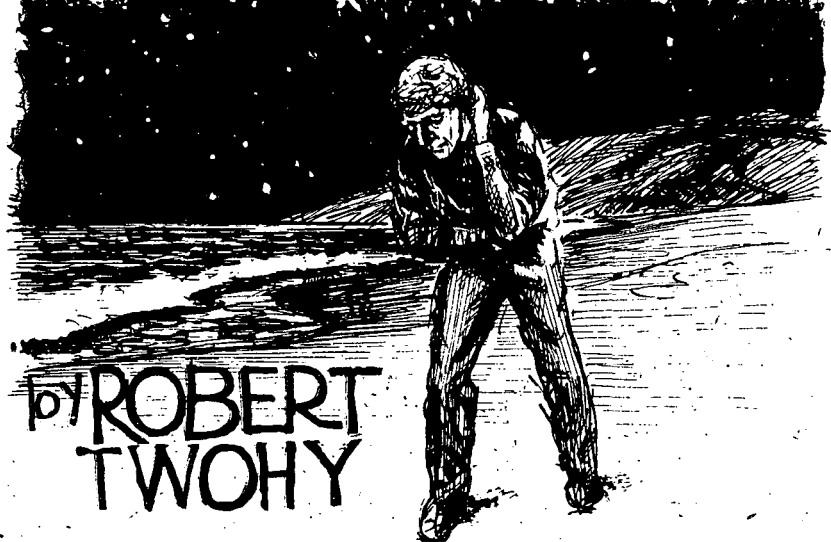
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When two events overlap, mystery writers look for logical connections . . .

COINCIDENCE



At 3:00 in the A.M. of a Saturday in early September, Ogrowski woke up with a big urge to drive to the city and run on Ocean Beach.

Quietly, so he wouldn't wake May, he got on pants, sweater, canvas running shoes, jacket—

She woke up anyway, stared at him. "What now?"

He told her about his urge.

She jumped out of bed, a tubby little woman in her forties with a pretty face. "You'll fit right in! The only ones out now are the loonies!"

She tossed in a prediction—"One of these nights you'll come home in a box!"

He grinned, grabbed her, gave her a rousing Russian-type kiss, and went out, a tough wiry little sixty-year-old with a big nose that showed lots of character. She went back to bed and to sleep because she had to get up at 5:30 for her job at Sardino's Coffee Hut and because she didn't really believe her prediction. The worst thing likely to happen to him would be his junky old '61 Ford station wagon would give out somewhere on 280—serve him right if it did—and he'd have to thumb his way back to Lindenvale in the early dawning.

In the early dawning it wasn't him at the apartment door but a young cop asking was she Mrs. Ogrowski.

No, she was May Callahan, a friend—what was the matter?

San Francisco P.D. had just sent word that one Alex Ogrowski of this address had been shot. "He's in General Hospital up there, a bullet through his neck and one in his chest—they're operating now."

May got clothes on, called Sardino, then Yellow Cab. She got to see Ogrowski and he looked not good, but the doctor said the bullet was out, the wounds looked clean, and he was a tough little egg and in a week or so he'd probably be able to go home.

She spilled some tears of relief as she gazed at him—"You Roosky screwball!"

Cops were at the hospital. They told her Ogrowski had been shot down near the surf, had made it up the beach and up the stone steps, where he had passed out, flopping down on Great Highway. A cop cruiser spotted him. About forty yards from where he'd been shot, behind the stone wall above the beach, they found two .32 shells.

May told them he'd lived in Lindenvale about two years, that he had a job in a box factory in South City, that he'd come west from New York where he'd lived about eight years, and before that he'd been a Russian. She said everybody liked him, he was crazy, and now maybe he'd show some sense but probably not—as soon as he was O.K. he'd be back at Ocean Beach, where he loved to run at night.

The cops asked if she wanted to drive his old station wagon home. She said good Lord no! So it stayed in the police garage and she took the 5L

bus back to Lindenvale and stopped at Pete's Place, where she told everyone (including me) what the cops had told her and that the Mad Russian was in good shape considering.

A light bulb had flicked on in my head. I remembered a story I'd read in last Tuesday's afternoon paper—not much of a story, a few inches—telling how a guy named Dorfman had left somebody's place on Diamond Heights in the city about 3:00 A.M., walked a block toward his apartment, and was found on the sidewalk two hours later, money still in his wallet and a bullet in his brain. Thirty yards away was a spent .32 shell.

I offered this to the congregation and we all agreed that Alex's assailant was probably the same guy—a new San Francisco nut killer, like Zodiac, out to avenge himself on the world, prowling dark streets, and gunning down the first lone stroller he happened on.

Except Alex hadn't been shot on a dark street.

The following Thursday I read in the afternoon paper that a woman named Jessie Tallent, 48, had been shot in front of her little house on Steele Street, in the Mission, the night before.

Her husband Floyd said she had jumped out of bed—the time was 3:40, he said—and, announcing that the drip-drip of the faucet in the driveway was driving her nuts, she'd thrown on a robe and padded out the front door. Two seconds later Floyd heard a shot, ran to the window, and saw a car—light-colored, was all he could see, and he couldn't be sure of that—highballing away down Steele.

At the bottom of the steps lay Jessie, dead, shot through the heart.

Fifty yards away in the street lay a .32 shell.

The marks on the bullet were identical to those on the bullets removed from Dorfman and Alex.

I liked May and Alex, and knowing them gave me an angle into the case. I write mystery stories for a living more or less and try to draw from murders that happen in the Bay area, using real people when I can.

I mulled things over. Dorfman and Jessie Tallent had been shot in city streets, but Alex had been shot on the beach. Why? If you're a psycho killer looking for a victim, Ocean Beach isn't the likeliest place to go looking. The urge to run had brought Alex to the beach. What had brought the killer? Just coincidence?

Possibly. But mystery writers don't like coincidences. When two events overlap we look for logical connections.

Another thought hit me. Where better to hide a very premeditated murder than in the middle of a bunch of apparent psycho murders? A notion that's been used. But everything has been used—and will be used again. And again.

So maybe all this to date was a snow job. Maybe the killer had a very specific murder in mind and when enough snow was whirling around he'd slip it in among the other bodies, hoping his very real motive might be lost in the snow.

The Monday after the Tallent killing I was in Pete's Place in midafternoon and May was there, having a highball. I learned that Alex was doing fine and should be home before the weekend.

Pete said, "Keep him off Ocean Beach at night."

"He won't stay off Ocean Beach. He'll be worse than before."

I agreed. I'd heard Alex at Pete's when he got his running urge. He'd start rhapsodizing about what a beautiful night to run at Ocean Beach and asking who would come with him. Everybody would tell him he was nuts, he'd get shot by a crazy, and he'd yell how he'd lived scared till he was fifty and now he was a citizen of this great free country he wasn't going to let the crazies keep him from following his legal urges. If he did that, what good was his freedom? He might as well go back to the homeland!

I remembered one night he was into that routine and old Sal told him, "Your theory's noble, Alex, and I'd go with you, except I won't ride in that beat-up station wagon of yours. That relic's an accident looking to happen."

Interesting, I thought—and wondered why I thought the memory was interesting.

I asked May, "When he drove up to Ocean Beach how would he go—280?"

"Sure, how else?"

To get to the heart of the city, and to most of the districts, you take 101, Bayshore Freeway. For Golden Gate Park, S.F. State, Ocean Beach, you take 280. So from his apartment Alex would drive west up through Marlborough, the swanky village in the hills, using Castle Drive, which ends at the access road to 280, Northbound.

I walked out with May and as we moseyed along Lawton I said, "Has Alex said anything about his drive to the beach that night?"

She blinked. "What's to say?"

"Did he say if he could have been followed?"

"No. Followed? By who?"

"I've been wondering why the killer would think he'd find anyone at the beach."

"Just hoped he'd get lucky, probably."

"Sure. You're probably right."

Leaving May, I meandered along, following my thoughts. Sometimes when you're onto something, you get a tingle back of the neck. I had that tingle now.

Pete's Place—not a cocktail lounge but a saloon, shabby old fight pictures and posters on the walls, no jukebox, beat-up old pool table, everything mostly dark wood, scarred and carved on. Now and then someone from Marlborough, tired of stylish traps, curious to see how the lower orders drink or on a nostalgia trip, stops in. Lots of nights Alex had talked about running on Ocean Beach, and lots of nights he'd been razzed about his old station wagon. A stranger leaving Pete's, seeing the station wagon parked in front, would figure it was the one owned by the big-nosed little guy who liked to run on Ocean Beach.

If the same stranger, driving 280 to the city two Saturday nights ago, saw the old station wagon ahead of him, he could be pretty sure the guy was on his way to the beach, to run. No need to prowl dark streets for a victim. Here was his victim—follow him.

But why would the .32 killer be on 280 when the most-used route to the city is 101?

You'd use 280 if you lived near it.

If you lived near it, and you've stopped in at Pete's, you could be a resident of Marlborough.

When you think of Marlborough, you think of money.

Somebody in Marlborough might want somebody dead, so the first somebody could make money, maybe by inheritance. But if the second somebody went suddenly dead, the motive might stand out as too obvious—unless the corpse got buried, along with random other corpses before and after, in a snowbank.

Who would slay a bunch of people he didn't even know just to build a snowbank? I asked myself that, and the dark side of me answered, Plenty of people. And not just sick people—wicked people. There are such. As Sam Spade said once, "There's a lot of devilry in the world."

The San Francisco cops had no reason to think the .32 killer lived in

Marlborough. Neither did I, beyond my tacky logic—which, if I hadn't started with Pete's Place, could have gone bouncing off in another direction and wound up in San José or Fresno or anyplace. But Marlborough was where my thoughts had led me.

Monday had been the first murder. Five days later had been the Alex shooting—four days later, the second murder. This was five days since that.

I walked three blocks to the Lindenvale Police Station and asked if Lieutenant Birkell was in.

He's a big pleasant man I know as well as you know someone you see in Pete's or The Moonduster, who if he's alone you have a drink with and bat a few easy conversational balls. He has non-threatening grey eyes that seem to take in a lot. He probably stops at the high-class traps too, keeping up on what's happening around town.

He asked what was on my mind and I said if he had a few minutes I'd like to check out a plot idea that the .32 murders had started me thinking about.

He got it that I was being elliptical and with a nod that I should follow him turned and went down a corridor into an interview room.

He spent the next ten minutes listening to me, then he rubbed his big jaw and murmured, "So you think the killer could be someone from Marlborough and that the murders so far could be camouflage. I think I saw a TV show like that."

"I probably saw the same one. Plot ideas come from things you see, hear, read about—"

"Ideas for murder too sometimes. I couldn't do anything official about this."

"I know, it's just speculation. But what would you do if you could?"

"Oh, stake out on Slovener Road." That's the access road to 280 Northbound. "Assume the killer, if he lives in Marlborough, drives up to the city late—"

"All the shootings were after three."

He nodded. "So pick a time, say one A.M., sit up there, see if anyone goes out Slovener to 280, then follow, get a license number. If there's a .32 murder in the city that night, you got somebody to check on." He paused, rubbed his jaw again. "Or if something seems odd, maybe follow him, see what he's up to."

I got up. "O.K. Thanks for listening."

He was watching me with his level eyes. "You think this is a possibility, don't you?"

"I wrote a story once about a guy who when he got a hot idea his teeth started twanging."

He smiled slightly. "Are your teeth twanging?"

"No, but my neck itches."

He got up. "Like you said, it's five days since the Tallent killing. You want to follow this up?"

I thought, this is a very unconventional cop. Amiable face, relaxed movements, spreading paunch—close to retirement and he's picking up on something as insubstantial as what I've dropped on him, I, a writer he probably knows by reputation as someone without too firm a clutch on reality.

He said, "How about I pick you up at Pete's, about 12:30?"

"I'll be in front."

"This is unofficial. I'll be in my own car."

"O.K." I turned at the door. "I know why *I'm* doing this—it's every crime writer's dream to play detective. Why are *you* doing it?"

He said gravely, "Maybe I got a twang in my dentures."

He parked his green Plymouth sedan in the shadows the far side of Marlborough Fire Station #2, on Slovener. He went in and said a few words to the guy in charge there, then came back, and we sat smoking too many cigarettes, listening to his portable radio, soft music suitable for dribbling a night away by.

A half mile north is where Slovener turns into 280. Forty minutes became history, with no cars coming north up Slovener.

Even if my cheesecloth reasoning was right, even if the killer was a Marlboroughite, our idea that he would drive up to the city late at night was only a guess. He might drive up any time of day, even if one time he'd driven up after three and spotted Alex's station wagon. We couldn't know. But to follow out *any* idea, you have to start somewhere—which was why we were here, as 1:00 became 2:00.

By 2:20 I was sorry about the whole thing, sorry Birkell's dentures had twanged. Laying my head back, I closed my eyes.

And woke up riding down Castle Drive. "What time zit?" I asked.

"3:40."

"I slept. He could have gone past."

"No one did—except two cars going to the airport."

"How d'you know?"

"I don't. But one car I knew—he's a pilot. The other had luggage on a top rack."

"Either one could—"

"I know. I guess it comes down to whether you get a feel or not. I didn't."

He asked where I lived and got me there. "Same time tomorrow night?" he said.

"You want to do it again?"

"Tomorrow'll be the sixth day since the last shooting."

"Yeah, it will."

"I'll bring a thermos of coffee."

Coffee helped. I didn't fall into a swoon the second night.

2:00, 2:30—no car had passed since we'd got there.

Then lights showed south on Slover and came toward us. I felt excitement. The car came up, a big old Buick, and passed on, toward 280.

Birkell sighed. "I know that car. I interviewed the guy on a case last year. He's a fry cook in that all-night dump in Bel Carlo, lives in Lindenvale."

"So why's he on 280?"

"Got a rich lady-friend in Santa Lucia—her husband's a traveling man. She lives just off 280." Along with other cop talents, he has a memory.

"Why so late?"

"He works at night. Sometimes the dump closes at two."

"Yeah, but—"

"Uh huh." He smiled faintly. "He could be our man. I don't think he is, but if there's a .32 killing tonight I'll know who to talk to."

He looked at his watch. "Let's give it another half hour."

Forty minutes lumped past us. Nothing else did.

We rode down Slover, turned on Castle, headed down the hill for home.

Then the Plymouth slowed. Birkell was easing it to the right, into a driveway. His profile was set, his big jaw prominent. He swung around in the driveway and headed back up Castle.

"Saw in the mirror lights come out a driveway—that one." He nodded to the one we were passing.

I caught the name on the box. "Whitman."

"Possible," he murmured.

"What is?"

"I know the kid there."

From the crest of Castle we could see headlights moving fairly fast down Slover, the shape of a big car behind them.

Birkell shook his head. "It's not his car. I've seen him around town recently. He has a cream-colored Datsun. That could be his mother's—she has a black Imperial."

We turned into Slover. A hundred yards ahead, the big car was moving out. It swung onto the freeway.

We did the same. There was a scattering of cars—not many. Birkell stepped up to sixty, which kept us steady with the big car, a hundred yards back. In the freeway lights we could see it was a rich-looking black Imperial.

He said, "That's the mother's. Could be he's driving though.—No, it's a woman driving."

"How d'you know?"

"I don't—it's a guess. The way she's handling it—not too good, but O.K.—an older woman. She's passed the Santa Lucia turn, so she's going to the city."

I followed his reasoning. Santa Lucia has some stylish enclaves, the next few towns don't. He might be wrong, but he figured she wasn't likely to turn off now, so San Francisco was her destination.

"Unless she takes the turn to the airport."

"No, the chauffeur'd be driving. She wouldn't want to park and walk."

We stayed looped in, in the right lane, which was clear. The Imperial rode the middle lane.

She had a chauffeur but he wasn't driving. "Could she be driving a late-night secret lover home?" One of my big dreams is to write a steamy novel of Marlborough high life, have it snapped up by A.B.C. or N.B.C., and run opposite *Dallas*, killing them in the Nielsens.

"Possible. She's not old. Mid-fifties. Her husband died eight years ago—Harmon Whitman, big industrialist."

"I remember the name." A big name in the Bay area.

I glanced at his calm face, his cool and steady eye. "Why are we following?"

He gave his faint smile. "Sometimes you do what you can and nothing happens, so you write it off, go on to the next. Then it pops up again all of a sudden, and you follow it, see if maybe this time—"

I didn't know what he was talking about, then I got a flash. "You said a while back, 'I know the kid there.' The Whitman kid?"

"Yeah."

"What about him?"

"Tom Whitman—he's not really a kid any more. Smooth, smart young guy—a student at U.C. now, I hear." He hears a lot—that's his trade. "He was sixteen when I talked to him, four years ago. His mother had four thousand in cash taken from a wall safe. She thought it was one of the house staff. It wasn't."

"You investigated?"

"Yeah. Marlborough had their head guy sick—that's Dick Mellick—and the second guy was pretty new so they borrowed me."

The big Mary's Help Hospital loomed to our left, on the hill, then was behind us. We were within a few miles of the city. It looked like the car in front was heading for the ocean, or the park, or through the park maybe to Golden Gate Bridge, and across it to Marin, which is stylish too, but less so than Marlborough, which was lush living when Marin was just livestock and apples.

"Who took the money—Tom?"

"Uh huh. I put it to him and got back a really first-rate look of astonished innocence. His mother told me I was a thick-headed fool. Insisted it was one of the servants, fired a few, then dropped the case. I never heard any more about it."

"Tom an only child?"

He nodded.

We were passing the functional-looking buildings of San Francisco State. There were a few cars around us now, at nearly 4:00 A.M., but not many yet. The Imperial rolled along at forty, O.K. speed for that hour.

Birkell said, "I got a very clear impression of him. A smooth, polite liar, with a lot of hate."

"For who?"

"Everyone, I think. For not electing him lord of the universe."

I looked at the big black car crossing Lincoln Way into the park. "But you're sure he's not driving."

"Not sure—guessing." His smile this time was more a slow skinning of lips back from teeth, like he was tasting something. "I'd like it if—"
His voice faded.

"If it *was* him driving, and he had a—*the* .32?"

He said softly, "Yes. I'd like that."

We were in the park. He'd tightened up some on the Imperial, which had slowed for the right turn onto Main Drive. We were now forty yards behind.

We followed past the DeYoung Museum, past the flower conservatory, got to the east edge of the park, slowed, crossed Stanyan, came out on Fell Street, which borders what's called The Panhandle, the narrow strip of greenery that's the handle if the park is a pan.

Birkell continued to lay back. The Imperial seemed not certain now, made as if to turn left, straightened, went another block, slowed, went on. "Reading street signs," Birkell muttered. "Not familiar with the district."

The big car made the next corner, turned left—I caught the sign, Haste Street. Old two- and three-story residences on both sides, once-careful old houses made over into apartments and rooms. There were few parking spaces. The Imperial crossed the next intersection, then slid into a space halfway up the block. Birkell had slowed, and as the car in front parked he slid the Plymouth into a space before a driveway and cut the motor and the lights.

I asked, "What now?"

He motioned, and followed me out on the sidewalk side, closing the door silently. Walking to the car beyond the driveway, he went around the back of it and leaned on the trunk, sticking his head left to look beyond the car. I moved behind him, crouched, looked around him at the Imperial, sitting there black and silent.

He mouthed, "Waiting for someone."

His watch said five past four.

Headlights showed, coming up the cross street from our right. We bent and averted our faces. I hoped it wasn't a cop cruiser, because if they spotted us we'd have explaining to do.

The car slowed and turned right on Haste—a light-colored Datsun.

I looked at Birkell's set face. He gave a nod.

So Mrs. Whitman's Imperial had come to the city, to this decaying street, at four in the A.M. and now her son's Datsun had arrived. What, if anything, did it have to do with the .32 murders?

The Datsun went past the Imperial to the end of the block, pulled into a space, went dark.

The Imperial door opened and a figure got out—a slim woman's body in slacks and a jacket, a scarf over white hair. She closed the car door and made no sound doing it.

She stood a few seconds by the car. Someone had got out of the Datsun and was moving toward her. I couldn't make out the person clearly—dark pants, dark jacket, everything dark, a silhouette. No pallid glow of face or hands.

The woman moved forward, then stopped. The dark silhouette stopped too—they were about twenty feet apart. The woman gave a sudden sharp cry and turned and ran back toward the Imperial.

Birkell gave a loud, booming yell. "Stop! Police officer!"

There was a shot—not from Birkell's gun, which I saw in his hand as he pounded across the intersection. I also saw what had put him in action—metal glinting against the dark of the silhouette. The woman was down on the pavement.

Another shot. Birkell slid to the side and now *his* gun fired. I'd started around the car after him, but my legs decided it was time to go rubbery. I braced on the hood of the parked car, watching.

The dark figure had turned and was running toward the Datsun. Birkell, on one knee, fired again. The running figure swerved, went down. Away from it, falling out into the street, went the chunk of shiny metal I'd seen—a gun.

Birkell lumbered forward, stood over the dark figure, his gun pointing down at it.

Lights had popped on in some of the houses. Danger past, my legs got life, ran me across the intersection.

Ahead of me the woman had got up and was moving toward Birkell and the other person.

I got even with her and she turned a long white face toward me—mouth a loose red hole, blue eyes like shellac. She seemed to be not hit, but at least partly in shock.

The figure lay on its back, right knee up. Black hands gripped below

the left knee and red ran through the fingers like they were wringing blood from the black pantleg.

Black hands, black pants, black jacket and shoes—black hood over the head, two slitted eyeholes, a slit underneath.

The gun lay ten feet from the figure. I moved toward it. "Leave it!" Birkell snapped. I left it.

People were at open doorways. I heard sirens.

The woman had stopped beside me, her glazed eyes fixed on the black figure. Her voice was a thin whisper. "Who are you? You have Tom's car, you fired at me. Who are you?"

The low voice from the mask was fringed with mockery. "Momma? You don't recognize your own son?"

The woman's eyes drifted up under her lids. She slumped into me.

That was my contribution to the night's proceedings—to hang onto Mrs. Harmon Whitman and keep her from crashing all the way down.

I was easing her to the pavement when the first cop car came pulsing up Haste.

The gun was a .32. Tests showed it was the gun that had fired bullets into Dorfman, Jessie Tallent, and Alex.

Tom Whitman said it wasn't his gun, he'd found it late Monday night under a bush near Strawberry Creek on the campus and picked it up because—well, who wouldn't?

Why hadn't he turned it in to the Berkeley cops?

He'd put it in his glove compartment, planned to turn it in Tuesday. But Tuesday he'd had steady classes and forgotten all about it.

Did he expect anyone to believe that?

Tom, who had a long thin face like his mother, and pale-blue eyes, shrugged and smiled. He had a boyish, friendly smile. Birkell, who was at the interrogation at the hospital, said, "You wouldn't want to see a more open, decent-looking young guy."

Why was he all in black and wearing a black hood?

Well, Johnny Cash dressed in black—the Man in Black. Tom liked Johnny Cash. The hood? He was acting out a fantasy. He liked to tease his mother sometimes. It was a private game between them.

Wearing a hood was teasing?

Shooting at her was a game?

He hadn't shot at her. Somebody had shot at *him*—he'd panicked, started to run, shot back. At the fellow who shot, not at his mother.

Why did he have the gun with him when he left his car and went toward his mother?

Because it was a dark street. He'd read about the recent psycho murders in the city, remembered the gun in the glove compartment, and took it on an impulse as protection for him and his mother.

Why was he meeting her at 4:00 A.M. on a dark street in the city?

That was a personal matter and he'd rather they got that information from her, he really didn't feel he should discuss it.

Had she expected to meet him in that block on Haste?

Sure. It wasn't a coincidence that they were both there.

Did he realize that the gun he said he'd found at Strawberry Creek was a murder gun?

Yes. It was his bad luck to have found it. He didn't blame them that they were suspicious. But why would he want to kill people he didn't know, then lure his mother to the city and shoot her?

Inheritance?

All the money he'd need she'd give him. Why would he think of a terrible plan like that?

There was Birkell to say Tom had fired twice before Birkell shot. There was me to support him. But no other witnesses had reached their windows till after the gunfire—and I was a block away.

It pretty much came down to Mrs. Whitman. Mrs. Whitman said it was all confusion, she had the impression the policeman had shot first.

Then why had she run toward him?

She was confused, panicky—she just wanted to get in the car.

Why had she said to her son, "You fired at me?"

She doubted she had said that, she thought she had said, "*They* fired at me." Wasn't the person who claimed to have heard her—"that writer, so-called"—wasn't he a friend of the policeman?

Had her son ever teased her by wearing a black hood?

Tom would tease her—he could be silly—yes, once before he'd frightened her for a second by wearing a black hood. They had laughed about her being so frightened.

Why had she driven from Marlborough and Tom from his apartment in Berkeley to meet in The Panhandle, at 4:00 A.M.? She said it was a

personal matter, as her son had said, and on advice of her attorney she wouldn't discuss it until the trial, if Tom was indicted for the '32 murders.

Maybe she could have been pressured to open up, but for some reason she wasn't.

Birkell and I were parked in his Plymouth at Raccoon Point, looking out over the bay. "Just like four years ago," he said: "She's still not ready to face what he is."

"Even after he shot twice at her. How do you think he got her to come up to Haste Street?"

He shrugged. "No major problem for him. Maybe he told her he was in trouble, she had to come right away, bring money, he had to buy somebody off. She had over \$2,500 in her purse."

"How'd she explain that?"

"She didn't. Just looked surprised, like didn't everyone carry a little money when they went out?"

"So she won't say anything until the trial. What'll she say then?"

"Who knows? She has plenty of time to work up a story—if there is a trial."

"If! With the murder gun, with your evidence, mine—"

"The gun we haven't traced to him, probably never will. It'll turn up as a stolen gun, black-marketed. Jessie Tallent's husband can't identify the car. Nobody at Tom's apartment in Berkeley can say what nights it was out of the carport, or when it came back. So what it comes down to, right now, is pretty much his story against ours—with his mother chipping in where she can on his side."

"His story! That Strawberry Creek baloney?"

"Give it to the attorney she'll get for him and it'll come out filet mignon. That's what the D.A.'s thinking. He needs more than he's got. He needs her to tell the truth, which she's not ready to."

"So the guy gets away with two murders. We might as well have stayed home."

He looked at the blue bay, on which some sailboats were blithely skipping, and said quietly, "We did better than we should have. Because the idea we started on—that a Marlborough man had spotted Alex's car on 280 and followed it to the beach—was wrong, a hundred percent wrong. Tom wasn't at Marlborough that weekend—the servants say that. He drove to the city that night from Berkeley, like the other two times,

and just took it in his head to drive to the beach—saw a guy running there and shot him.”

I yelled, “Just a *coincidence*?”

He nodded.

“He just *happened* to go to the beach, for no reason at all?”

“It looks that way.”

“So all it was was a writer spinning a dopey plot. And Tom kills two people, and shoots Alex, and gets away with it. So all we did was pointless.”

“Not pointless. We saved a life.”

“Yeah. Mrs. Whitman’s.”

His eyes were cool and steady. “Would you rather we hadn’t?”

I looked away, at the sailboats. Feeling approximately three feet tall.

He said, “And now she knows her son’s a killer. Hard to face up to. Her only son, after all—somebody special, who one day might be elected lord of the universe. Hard to face he’s really just a warped, vicious punk, crazy for big money, eager to kill her for money, killing other people as a smokescreen.” He lit up some disease and gazed through the smoke at the sailboats.

“The D.A.’s right, I think, not to hammer at her. Time for that later. For now, leave her alone with it, let her think about the murders—how two people died and she didn’t, and her money was why they died. Let her think about it—see what happens.”

“You think she might open up?”

“The D.A. thinks she might.”

“And if she doesn’t?”

“You do what you can. There’s just one thing you can be sure of—you won’t always be a winner. So you do what you can, then go on to the next one.”

I thought that was a good place to let the discussion fade out—and a story that I don’t know yet how it ends.

The February 3 Issue of *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine* will be on sale January 7.

If he didn't do what she asked, Jill would hand the photo over to the police



by
PENELOPE WALLACE

I didn't see Lady Fate's hand as I opened the pub door at ten past nine that Friday evening—I always went into The Dog and Duck at ten past nine on Friday evenings, business permitting.

Marie, the barmaid, was resting her boobs on the bar counter same as usual, and same as usual I wasn't going to get anywhere with her.

"Evenin', Marie."

"Evening, Joe. The usual?"

I nodded and she heaved her equipment off the bar and headed for the pump. Her strong right arm pulled the lever twice and the foaming pint was on the counter.

"What are you havin', love?" I asked her.

"Campari, please, Joe."

It used to be port and lemon but times change. All this bloody telly.

I looked round and nodded to the regulars I knew. Then I saw Ted. He was sitting at a lonely table under the dimmest light. He saw me, left his beer on the table, and came over.

"'ullo, Joe, join me?" He jerked his head towards the table. Always furtive was Ted.

I followed him with misgivings and sat opposite him. As something to look at, he didn't measure up to Marie. He looked right, left, and under the ashtray, then he spoke in a harsh whisper. "I got a good job for you, Joe."

"Last job you got me they had a bloody Great Alsatian. I had to sleep on my face for a fortnight."

"No dogs, no trouble—it's an 'ouse in 'ampstead."

"That's bad news for a start. Hampstead's swarmin' with the Old Bill."

"But you got the van—and this 'ouse, it's on the corner, so you park down the side street under the laurels, Bob's yer uncle, and the ground-floor loo 'as an ordinary catch. Snick with a knife, up with the winder, and up the stairs. Everyone's away. First door on the left—on the winder sill be'ind the curtain all in a cardboard box. Good antique stuff wot your friend—"

"No names."

"Well, 'e'd give you a good price. Are you on?"

Instinct and experience told me to say no, but the bookie was pressing and the girl friend was expensive. "All right, you're on."

Ted fished out a dirty piece of paper and handed it over.

An ill-drawn map showed the house on the corner of Allington Avenue and Rayne Road with the entrance in Allington.

"The 'ouse is called The Cedars," said Ted hoarsely. "You'll burn the map, won't you?"

"You bin watchin' too much spy stuff on the telly."

"Don't burn it too soon or you'll forget it, with your memory."

"Come off it. Now how do I get there?"

He dipped a finger in his beer and mapped it on the table.

"Here's The Royal Tree, then you turn left, left, right—" The beer trail wound onto Rayne Road. "You can park there, then over the wall. Lav's here. Through the window, up the stairs, turn left—"

Four hours later I was cruising along Allington Avenue. No lights in the corner house and, happy sight on the doorstep; one pint of milk and the paper in the letter box. I hoped that didn't mean the owners planned a late return. I took the back streets to Rayne Road, parked the van away from the light, and proceeded—as the Old Bill says—to the house on the corner. No lights anywhere. Over the wall—there's the loo. In easy, up the stairs, turn left into the room, over to the window, and—

That's when it started to go wrong.

Suddenly there was a flood of light and a sweet voice said, "Turn around slowly."

I turned. There was a flash of light. She was sitting up in bed—young and attractive—and holding a camera.

"It's a fair cop," I obliged.

"You'll have to do better than that."

"All right, I thought I saw smoke coming from the window and I broke in to effect a rescue."

"Come here," she said.

Aye, aye, I said to myself and moved towards the bed.

"I've taken your photo and I'll hand it to the police if you don't do what I ask you."

Aye, aye. So she was one of those. I started to loosen my tie.

"No," she snapped. "Sit on the end of the bed."

I did as she said and thought it was a pity she wasn't one of those. A very nifty little number she was with her fair hair and blue eyes. She leaned across and picked up a tape recorder.

"You're not recording my voice," I told her. "It'd be as bad as being in your bloody camera."

She looked uncertain.

"Suppose you tell me what it's all about," I said. "Are you going to scream for the police? They might tell you not to leave the paper in the door and the milk on the step."

"Did it fool you?"

"Yes, it did."

"It was part of the plan—that and getting the news through to the right quarters."

I wondered if Ted ever got anything right and how she'd gotten the info to him. "So you wanted to be burgled. Insurance?"

"No," she said. "I'm a reporter, freelance. I'm doing a crime series and I want to get the view—if you'll forgive the expression—of the little man." I didn't like that, but I let it pass.

"Of course," she went on, "I could talk to a dozen men in pubs who'd tell me they pulled this blag and that blag when the most they've thieved is a free ride on the bus. Of course, you'll probably tell me a pack of lies too but at least I'll know you're the genuine article."

"So you just want to talk to me?"

"Yes. Sorry. Are you disappointed?"

"Well, you can't shoot all the ducks at the fair. What do you want to know—and what happens if I tell you?"

"If you give me an interview, I'll give you the photo—and the camera. It's quite a good one and you might find it useful. Then I'll say goodbye and thank you and that'll be the end—unless you want to buy the Sundays and see who offers the most. My name's Jill." She stuck out her hand and I leaned across and shook it. She was wearing pajamas—the top, at least—and a very fetching perfume.

She picked up a notebook and pencil. "My shorthand's pretty good. Let's start with your upbringing. You're better educated than I'd expected."

"So-so. Not your fallen public-school boy."

"Right. Start with your first crime."

So I told her my life story, from nicking spares from the garage. I even told her about some of my birds, but I was careful not to be too detailed about jobs I'd got away with. Even the Old Bill sometimes reads the Sunday newspapers.

It was six in the ayem when I left, but still December dark, and I climbed back over the wall with the camera in my pocket, reckoning I was ruining my reputation if anyone saw me. But they didn't and I was in the van and away before the milkman added another pint to the doorstep.

I hadn't got far up Allington Avenue when I was flagged down by two coppers in a Rover. Well, for once I felt no sweat about them looking

under the floorboards—I was clean as a whistle. Well, a fairly grubby whistle when they found the camera.

“Just been visiting a bird and she took a photo of me,” I explained.

“And gave you the camera.”

“Yes—a kind of anniversary present.”

The copper looked at it carefully.

“Eleven photos taken. All of you?”

“No,” I said, wondering what the hell the other ten were.

The second nozzler got out of the car then and strolled up. “Evening, Joe,” he said.

So it wasn’t suprising when I ended up in the nick.

Eventually they let me go and kept the camera. It hadn’t been too bad, but you don’t get treated like royalty when you’ve got a record.

I trundled home in the old van, faced a bad reception from Karen, who was just off to work. “You said late, but you never said bloody morning,” she complained. It was too long a story and I didn’t think she’d believe the part about the blonde, so I said I was sorry and agreed to buy her a new coat and turned in for a kip.

I was still dreaming about the blonde when there was a thunderous knocking at the front door. Wondering if the blonde had a disbelieving husband or if the bookie had sent his boys, I staggered to the front door, wrapping a dressing gown round myself.

Suave is the word I’d have used—suave and cold as a volunteer virgin. I didn’t invite them in but they stepped by me. *Very* hard-nosed. Gestapo? Hit men?

“Special Branch,” said the largest.

So I was right. Christ, what now?

“About the film in your camera, which was a present from your girl friend. Name?”

“Well—”

“Right.” He read the caution and advised me I was being done for espionage.

I thought I’d be safer standing trial for attempted burglary so I gave him the S.P. He didn’t believe a word of it. “And the name and address of your contact?”

“She’s not my contact. All I know is her name’s Jean or Jill and the house is on the corner of—” Damn, Ted was right about my memory.

"It's Allington Avenue, that I do remember, and it's the name of a tree—bloody great big one in the front garden. Pine! That's it, The Pines."
• So off we go with the big one sitting in the back with me and the other by the driver.

There's The Pines on the corner and we march past the tree and up to the front door. There's a tinkling bell and the door's opened by a tinkling little brunette. Quite an eyeful but not the right girl.

The leader announced his identity, the girl announced hers, and—reluctantly—invited us to follow her to the library.

"Have you seen this man before?" he asked her.

She glanced distastefully at my unshaven face and said she hadn't.

"No," I agreed, "she's not the one who was here last night."

She looked even more distasteful and said she'd returned an hour ago from Paris, and she could prove it.

"Someone else was here," I said.

SB glared down at me. "Are you sure it's the right house."

"Of course I'm sure—I can describe the downstairs loo—blue-striped wallpaper and a catch a baby could open."

So the girl led us through and there was the loo—yellow with green flowers and a couple of highly efficient locks on the window.

I don't remember much of the journey to the nick. You could say I was stunned. Twenty-four hours of questioning, a brief appearance before the beak, remanded in custody.

Ted would remember the right house, but how to get hold of Ted without landing him in it? Well, I'd have visitors—Karen, someone who could pass on the message.

But all I had was a visit from my brief and that not in private. I did ask him if he could check the corner houses for girls named Jean or Jill, but he didn't like espionage and he obviously thought I was mixed up in it or how did I have a camera with one picture of myself guiltily starting and ten excellent pictures of Britain's latest and most secret weapon?

After twelve years of thieving, I was prepared for the odd spot of bird, but this was something else. I'm as patriotic as the next man and my feelings were hurt—particularly by the prospect of a long, long spell in maximum—maybe even a swap and an everlasting winter in Russia.

Time passed slowly.

No visitors—not even Karen, though I'd written her a couple of times, and not even the brief.

Not even the bastards from Special Branch.

Then the miracle happened.

Someone saved me a copy of the *Sunday World*—and there she was, blonde little Jill and banner headlines on her series of articles. And guess who figured in this one?

No names and a few unflattering comments on the waste of my mediocre abilities. I started to yell for my brief, for Special Branch. It took them a time, but they checked Jill, checked her story that the film contained photos taken at Wimbledon, checked the boy who sat beside her there and confirmed what she said, checked the number on her insurance policy and the one on the camera they held—and found that somewhere along the line the cameras had been exchanged. Someone had seen a fat man. Me, I was free to go—Jill said she wouldn't bring charges—and when the Old Bill heard how she'd laid the bait they agreed.

The Special Branch boys drifted away without even an apology and I was back for a tearful reunion with Karen.

The next Friday at ten past nine I went to The Dog and Duck.

"Evenin', Marie."

"Evening, Joe. You been away?"

"Just a short holiday."

"The usual?"

"Please—and for you?"

"Campari, thanks. Ted's been asking for you."

Well, you don't tempt fate twice. I'd been a fool to come here and I would have to find another drinking place.

"No, Ted," I told him. "It's not on."

"Sorry, Joe. Just thought you'd like to hear about the fat man."

Reluctantly, I followed him to his corner table.

"What fat man?"

"The one you was in a spot of bovver over. The one 'oo swapped the camera."

"So?"

"So 'e give 'imself up, said 'e was sick of them foreign bastards askin' 'im if the weapon was in the ball or in the racquet."

"So be it," the Governor said . . .

THE DOUBLE FISHHOOKS



by ISAK
ROMUN

Shimchick was dead and so was his victim. We were left with the knowledge that we had misread Shimchick's motivation. We also had the mysterious double fishhooks drawn by him as he lay dying but defiant. They looked like this:



I was down in Circulation talking to Jan Harrald, the manager there, when the call found me.

"There's a priest here to see you," a female voice in the city room informed me.

I let out a tired breath

"Stout and rumped?" I asked.

"Yes."

"Staring eyes? Make you nervous?"

"Yes."

"Red-faced, pockmarked nose?"

There was a pause and I imagined the caller looking back over her shoulder to verify these last points. When she came back on the line she sounded hesitant, puzzled. "Yes, all those things, but he's not here now. I think he's gone."

No, I thought, he didn't leave. A moment later, I saw that my visitor had indeed not left. He pushed through the double doors of the loading dock, his nose flared and, I swear, quivering, as if he could locate me by my scent. It was Father Bad Nose all right, so called by sly parishioners for obvious descriptive purposes and as a pun on his family name.

Father Philippe Badineau was one of those secular priests who are the despair of their bishops. They don't fit into parish life, they have a problem, or they never should have gone into a contemplative order in the first place.

Not that these men don't try. They strive to leave their problems behind them and either enter into the activities of their parishes or adopt new enthusiasms. Father Badineau had taken the latter course, but he had more than an enthusiasm, he had a cause—a cause into which he was trying his best to draw me.

As he stood on the loading dock looking nervously from one end of it to the other, I decided that flight would be demeaning. So I waved to Jan and went out on the dock.

"Oscar, I've been searching everywhere for you. We've got to have a few words."

We shook hands and I noticed that his clasp was firm; without the quaver I had felt when he first came to St. Wenceslaus.

"Care for a cup of coffee?" I asked. Then, prompted by the devil himself, I added cruelly, "Jan's got something in his desk to improve the taste."

I didn't even receive a reproachful glance; the intensity of his purpose had shut out everything else.

"Can we talk—by ourselves?"

"I'm busy, Father. I've got to put my column together," I lied, the evidence of the lie right there on the dock as newspaper bundles were slung into waiting trucks. "I mean I have to interview someone for tomorrow's column." Another lie. I had a ten-day backlog.

"Can you be too busy to talk to a poor priest about saving a human life?"

"I don't want to talk about Shimchick, Father Badineau. I'm not sorry to see him where he is."

Where Shimchick was was the nearby state penitentiary. He was waiting out the final days before his last walk on earth.

"Shame on you, Oscar. He's saved, you know. Can we say that about ourselves? Can we 'good people' say, with the certitude I say this of Larry Shimchick, that we have hope and confidence of a life beyond this one?"

I thought, When everything's turned out wrong for you, when nothing seems to have gone right in your life, put your trust in a myth. Shimchick's belated goodness was Father Badineau's myth. Without the myth, without its acceptance as reality, the priest had another failure to chalk up, another defused enthusiasm. Perhaps this might be the last one, the real beginning of a life of booze and brooding.

"I can't cash in that favor, Father. Not for Shimchick."

"That favor" involved no less a personage than the Governor. I had watched Homer J. Johnson for a number of years with a newspaperman's keen and skeptical eye. I had watched him operate as a young Commonwealth's attorney for one of our larger counties, as a fair and aggressive prosecutor in the courtroom, and as state Attorney General. He was a decent, knowledgeable, and capable man. But like most decent, knowledgeable, and capable men, Homer Johnson had gaps in his following because he was unwilling to make promises.

In the distribution area of my paper, *The Paulsburg Advance-Indicator*, Johnson stood to lose heavily when he ran for Governor. This was bad news because no candidate had ever gotten to the Governor's mansion without carrying Paulsburg and the populous counties surrounding it. I set out to do my bit to swing the vote to Johnson. First, I convinced the paper to endorse him, then I put my column to work for him. Finally,

I spent long, unpaid overtime hours writing gratuitous editorials shedding light on the man, his policies, his potential for the state.

Well, Johnson carried Paulsburg and environs and made his way to the capital. On victory night, I got a call. It was the Governor-elect. While he had run a campaign based on no promises, Johnson let me know that he owed me. I had a favor coming. It was this favor that Father Badineau wanted me to call in now.

"I can't," I said again.

"The old story, Oscar. We hand folks over to God's mercy and show none ourselves."

"George Eliot, right?"

"Yes." He seemed surprised.

I shot back at him, "Let me lay this Eliot on *you*. There is a mercy which is weakness, and even treason against the common good."

We had reached a standoff. Just as well, for about then Jan Harrald beckoned me into his office to answer the phone. It was my editor.

"Monahan," he asked, "have you got a priest down there with you?"

"Yes—Father Badineau."

"That's the one. He called me earlier and told me he was going to try and see you. He wants you to go to the capital with him to plead with Johnson for Shimchick's life."

"He hasn't quite gotten around to that part, but that's what he's leading up to."

"Look, Monahan, I can't tell you to go up there with him. I can only say the story might mean another press-association award for you. Anyway, I've called the Governor's appointments secretary. You can see Johnson this afternoon. If you do decide to go, call the secretary so he can block in the time."

I hung up without saying anything more and stood for a while, my hand on the phone.

Then I returned to the dock and went up to the priest.

"My car's in the parking lot. Here are the keys. You go and wait. I'll be with you in a minute." I didn't sound enthusiastic.

"Where are we going?"

"Where else? To take tea with the Governor."

He looked actually ecstatic. "The first order of love is justice, Oscar."

"Don't tell me that or I might change my mind. Go to the car. I'll be right with you. I have to call ahead. . . ."

We didn't talk much on the way up. However, I did ask, "You read about the trial, I guess?"

"I read the transcript."

"Remember the part after sentencing where Shimchick says to the prosecuting attorney, 'You're dead, man—dead! You better pray I'm not changed to life because I'll get you. You're dead, dead!'"

"Yes."

"Remember who the prosecutor was?"

"Yes."

"Good, then you know what the odds are going to be."

"Governor Johnson won't hold that against Larry. Words uttered in passion and despair." He turned a sad, assured smile upon me. "Besides, I have you."

We drove in silence after that.

In the Governor's office, Father Badineau did not make a good impression. The priest was too full of his subject and was badly organized. Instead of getting right to the point, which Johnson would have appreciated, Father Badineau began by relating that one of his functions at St. Wenceslaus was to minister to the spiritual needs of the Catholics at Paulsburg State Penitentiary. The priest went on to tell of Shimchick's desire to see him and of his agonizing but rewarding sessions with the condemned man leading to the prisoner's rehabilitation.

Consequently, he said, Shimchick was saved. This being so, there was no need of punishment—surely not capital punishment anyway. Shimchick *must* have this cup taken from him, Father Badineau demanded, growing Scriptural, so that he could spend a useful life engaged in good works. You do see these points, don't you, Governor?

The Governor didn't. But he didn't debate. Instead, he beamed at Father Badineau, praised him as a concerned citizen, acknowledged the many good arguments made, and gently ushered the priest out of the office so that he, Johnson, could talk to me alone.

Now it's all on me, I said to myself.

The Governor was friendly. He reseated me, offered me coffee, and casually chatted of the past while a secretary brought in two steaming cups. Then, leaning back in his chair, he asked, "So, Oscar, you think I should let Shimchick off with life?"

"Yes."

"Do you recall what he said to me that day in the courtroom?"

"Your prisons are sturdy."

"You don't sound convincing. I had the idea by what you wrote back then that you thought the sentence fair, that Larry Shimchick was getting what was coming to him."

I realized about that time that, somehow or other, Father Badineau had gotten to me. I pictured him sitting in the outer office, refusing offers of refreshment, his protuberant eyes fastened on the door behind which Johnson and I comfortably sipped our coffee and decided as much the fate of the priest as that of Larry Shimchick.

The Governor interrupted my thoughts, "Well, do you believe Shimchick got what was coming to him?"

"I'm less interested in Shimchick getting what's coming to him than I am in Father Badineau getting what's coming to *him*."

"And what's that?"

"A break. A break at last. Perhaps a last chance for a little self-esteem based on what he considers a solid achievement."

"And you don't?"

"What I think is solid doesn't matter. As I said, I'm in *his* corner, not Shimchick's." I paused for about three seconds. "Also, there's the story."

"So, it comes down to that."

He might just have been right. I said, anyway, "That's not all of it. But you can't expect me to forget I'm a newspaperman."

"This cleans the slate?"

"You're the one who wrote on it. I never asked for anything."

He pulled himself up to the desk. "I'll call the warden."

"Wait. Let Father Badineau deliver the good news. That's only fair. Write a note or something commuting Shimchick's sentence to life."

He took a pen out of a holder and a letterheaded sheet from a drawer. "O.K., I'll write the warden telling him Shimchick gets life and Father Badineau is to inform him. Official documentation from the Attorney General's office will follow. But I'll call the warden anyway. Not to tell him anything; just to make sure he or a responsible representative is there for the priest." He seemed about to write, but held the pen poised over the paper. "Anything else?"

"Yes, I want to be there. With a photographer."

The earlier friendliness was gone as he looked at me for an unbearable moment.

"So be it," he said finally and began writing.

At the prison gate guards sped us through to an inner yard. Another guard met us there and escorted us to the warden's office.

I had telephoned down from the capital for a photographer and Abe Slaughter met me outside the office. Abe is the best, the man I team up with any time I need pictures. "What's happening?" he asked.

"A blockbuster. Make sure that camera of yours gets everything." Then I whispered, "Shimchick's getting life."

"Who says there's no justice in the land?"

Father Badineau and the warden came out of the office then and the four of us, accompanied by a captain of guards, walked down long corridors and through several doors until we had clanged ourselves into the very heart of the prison, a special place at the core of despair.

I saw Shimchick in the third brightly lit cell from the door. He was on his knees, beads enchaining his clasped hands. I thought, You can stop now, Larry. Here comes the answer.

He stood up as we approached. The guard captain had the door unlocked and motioned Shimchick to come out.

I had seen Shimchick many times during the trial and I knew his record. It was a catalog of petty and common back-page crimes marked by violence, but violence peculiarly remote: a knife, a gun, the pipe beating of a weak or weakened victim (no physical contact, no hand-to-hand contests) all leading up to the final and inevitable effort, murder.

He was a small, thin man who, nonetheless, gave the impression of pudginess, of softness gone to flab. His face was curiously salamandroid: spotted, smooth, dampish, wide-mouthed, with eyes that seemed to look at you, half-lidded and mournful, from the sides of his head.

This was the Shimchick I knew, and this was the Shimchick I saw that day in the prison, but with a nagging difference which, at first, I couldn't define. Then it came to me. Before, he was like a flat, two-dimensional person, a human black hole consuming light and giving none off. Now, there was an emanation from him. You felt, though it was weak, some force of personality, some impingement of the Shimchick spirit upon your own—as if that spirit, lost before, had sought and found and reinfused its host.

I had never seen Shimchick smile. That day, at the prison, he smiled

at the priest. But the smile disappeared as he noticed the uncongenial presences around Father Badineau.

However Shimchick looked, Father Badineau didn't notice. He rushed to the prisoner, held him at arm's length, and then shouted into his face, "Good news, Larry, the best of news! You won't die!" Then he gathered the small man into his arms and, as Abe's camera clicked and flashed, kissed him on the cheek. Shimchick said nothing, but stood in the rough, joyous embrace of the priest, receiving without emotion a hesitant slap on the back from the warden ("Larry here has come a long way since he's been with us—"), his blood-drained face registered nothing except, possibly, gasping surprise. Or shock.

Later, as the others were leaving, I caught at Shimchick's sleeve before he reentered his cell. "Didn't he tell you what he was doing?" I asked.

"No, he never said," Shimchick answered dazedly. "Please tell him thanks."

The Shimchick affair was all good news. Everybody made out. My account and Abe Slaughter's memorable picture, captioned "Kiss of Deliverance," got picked up by the wires and brought national prominence to the main character in the drama.

Governor Johnson was hailed as a far-seeing and understanding statesman concerned with the welfare of all the citizens of our great state. His post-gubernatorial goal of gaining a Senate seat in Washington seemed assured, but behind this were party rumblings, inside and outside the state, that here was a man of real presidential timbre.

I never mentioned, either in my story or otherwise, my part in the commutation of Shimchick's sentence, but played up Father Badineau's role. That was better copy. As a result, Father Badineau was whisked up to the capital and made deputy to the head of the bishop's Outreach Ministry. There were clear indications that when the Ministry head moved up to the office of Chancellor, Father Badineau would take over.

I *did* get an award from our state press association, as did Abe Slaughter and the *Advance-Indicator*.

And Larry Shimchick? He got his life back. Wasn't that enough? There were all sorts of attractive offers for Shimchick to "write" the story of that life. One publisher even approached me to be the as-told-to co-author. Both Larry and I were cool to the suggestion.

Then things began to sour.

Unexpectedly, about a year after the commutation, we got word that Shimchick had knifed a fellow-prisoner.

After that, Shimchick was in trouble on an almost daily basis. All this was predictable if your mind could cut through the hullabaloo and myth of the moment and travel back to the mean and snarling Shimchick of the trial. But a lot of minds couldn't make that trip, couldn't accept the fact that there had been slim chance of Shimchick's lasting rehabilitation but that it might have been worthwhile to gamble on it anyway.

One of these minds belonged to the bishop. It was time for a scapegoat, in any case, and Father Badineau had to go. In short order he found himself assigned as associate pastor to one of the small, poverty-stricken parishes in the southwestern part of the state. We have a saying about that area: If you've only got two weeks to live, go there; it'll seem like a year. Who could blame a man for finding a bottle in a place like that?

At about the same time, the presidential whispers about Johnson ceased and it appeared that he might have a fight within his own party for the Senate nomination. Amid all this, a new trial for the knifing was being set up. When the day arrived, we were all in the courtroom ready to go but nothing happened. On the trip between the penitentiary and Paulsburg, Shimchick had escaped.

Shimchick had not only escaped, he had killed one of his guards and taken a handgun. Someone quickly remembered the threat he made to Johnson at the original trial. A ring of state troopers was thrown around the Governor's mansion and they and the Governor and an enlarged press corps, including a number of national names, grimly awaited Shimchick.

He never showed up. Instead, three days later, we found out he had traveled to that remote parish in a corner of the state and, finding Father Badineau alone in the rectory, had shot him.

It was a bizarre incident and I told my editor flat out that I was too close to the matter and would not write about it. And I didn't. Until now.

I said it was bizarre, and it was. Someone recognized Shimchick going up the rectory steps and immediately called the small town's two-man police force. They arrived in time to hear the shot that killed Father Badineau. A gun battle followed and Shimchick was hit several times but in non-vital spots. Finally, a hit, or the effect of several hits, finished the killer but not before he had scratched on a sheet of rectory notepaper with his own blood the double fishhooks.

You can imagine how the newspapers had a field day with that. Theories

were advanced and discarded, some enjoying a longer life than others, but no one ever came up with a satisfactory explanation of the double fishhooks. After a while speculation died and Shimchick's escape and its victims were forgotten.

There was another victim, by the way. His name was Homer J. Johnson, who after his term as Governor retired from politics at the relatively early age of forty-two; a youthful elder statesman, disqualified by party and public for high office, but too prestigious a figure to be offered less.

A few years after the tragedy, I was cleaning out my desk and came across a blown-up photograph of the double fishhooks. I stopped what I was doing, cleared the top of the desk, and placed the photograph in the center of it. Contemplating the photograph and recalling those last days, I suddenly realized everyone had had it wrong, because no one thought as Shimchick did. All the explanations for the brutal, apparently pointless killing of Father Badineau were flawed. All the explanations misread the motivation for the murderer.

There is a strain of weakness in all violence that is at once its cause and its product. This weakness assures the commission and recurrence of violence. Shimchick knew or sensed this, knew or sensed that, given the chance, he would return to the world of violence to the loss of that other world upon which he had trained his soul.

If things had moved inexorably toward the state's original solution, if everything had gone ahead as scheduled, Shimchick could have held his weakness in check, could have survived, with Father Badineau's help, the remaining days of precarious sanctity. But Father Badineau tinkered with Shimchick's plan of salvation. By giving Shimchick *this* life, he denied him the next. With a gesture of love, he had betrayed Shimchick.

Remembering that gesture, Father Badineau's frenzied, joyful kiss of deliverance, I knew what Shimchick had meant by the hasty scratching which looked to be a pair of fishhooks. With a felt-tip marker, I completed, on the photograph before me, the name the killer had started to write:

JUDAS

The man seemed to be just another writer trying to sell a book . . .

THE UNICORN'S DAUGHTER

by
**EDWARD
D. HOCH**



The man's name was Harvey Cross and he sat across the desk from me much as hundreds of other authors and would-be authors had in the years I'd been a senior editor at Neptune Books. In those first minutes of our meeting he wasn't especially different from those others. Slim and just a bit boyish, with a trace of a stutter, he clutched the thick manuscript to his chest and said, "I wanted to try Neptune with it first because you published Simon Ark's book."

"That was more than ten years ago," I reminded him. "If it's something occult we wouldn't really be interested at the present time." I was beginning to regret having agreed to see him. He could just as well have left his manuscript with my secretary, the practice followed with most other unsolicited submissions. But there'd been something in his voice on the phone that interested me. Seeing him now, I couldn't remember what it had been.

"Oh, it's not an occult book, Not in the true sense of the word. It's—I suppose you'd call it an adult fairy tale, about a strange place in the forest and a strange girl who lives there."

"I don't really think—"

"At least give it a reading!"

"All right, Mr. Cross. Why don't you leave it with my secretary? She'll—"

I was interrupted by the flashing of the intercom. I flipped a switch and heard Martha Scane, our publicity director, say, "This is Martha. Could I see you for a few moments when you're free?"

Harvey Cross had gotten out of his chair and was walking to the window. "Right, Martha," I acknowledged and flipped the switch.

—I started to turn toward my visitor when I heard the shattering of glass and saw him going through the window. "Cross!" I shouted, but it was too late.

I sat stunned for a second, then ran to the big broken window and peered out at the street twenty-eight stories below. I could see cars stopping and people gathering.

My secretary ran in. "What was that crash?"

"Put me through to the police, Irene! A man just jumped through the window!"

"Was it that Cross fellow?"

"I'm afraid so." I saw his manuscript in a corner of my desk and I glanced at the title page. *The Unicorn's Daughter* by Harvey Cross. It was all that was left of him now. I noticed the return address in the upper left-hand corner. It was a box number in Catskill, New York.

Others crowded into my office as word of the tragedy spread. "Terrible," Ash Gregory from the Art Department said, patting my shoulder. "Who was he, some nut?"

"I don't really know," I admitted. "Just an author trying to sell his book."

Martha Scane came in, her blonde hair flying. "My God! Did he jump while I was talking to you?"

"Just about. I didn't really see it happen. He walked over to the window and when I looked around he was going through the glass."

I told the police the same thing. They shook their heads and I got the impression they thought Harvey Cross had been less than rational. By the time they left and everyone else cleared out of my office I was still a bit unnerved. The building's maintenance people placed a sheet of plywood over the window until it could be replaced in the morning and the lack of a familiar angle of illumination further depressed me. I told Irene I'd work the rest of the day at home.

I was halfway out the door when I remembered the dead man's manuscript. I went back to my office for it but it wasn't on the desk. I wondered if the police had taken it without telling me, or if someone else had picked it up while my office was crowded.

On the way out I stopped at my secretary's desk. "Irene, send a memo around—ask if anyone inadvertently took a manuscript from my office today. The title is *The Unicorn's Daughter* and the author is Harvey Cross."

"The man who jumped?"

"That's right. The man who jumped."

When the manuscript didn't reappear by Friday afternoon my curiosity got the better of me. The newspaper accounts of Cross's spectacular leap from my office window had given his address as a furnished apartment in Brooklyn, and had listed no family. But he'd given me that box number in Catskill. Suddenly I was curious enough to pursue it.

That afternoon I phoned Simon Ark at the Institute for Medieval Studies where he'd been pursuing some esoteric research project for several months. He seemed pleased to hear from me. "Ah, my friend, I read about the bizarre event at your office."

"Bizarre is right. That's not the half of it, Simon." I told him about the vanished manuscript.

"Could one of your employees plan to sell it to another publisher, perhaps as his own?"

"That would presuppose it had some value. As near as I can tell, Harvey

Cross never published a thing. I can't believe the manuscript has any value at all, except perhaps as the final ravings of a troubled mind."

"But you didn't read it."

"No," I admitted.

"What do you plan to do about it?"

"He mentioned you, Simon. Before he jumped he said he came to Neptune Books because we'd published Simon Ark."

"Hardly a recommendation, my friend. The book wasn't one of your better sellers."

"He implied his book might have the same mystic quality that led us to publish it—though he denied it was an occult book."

"I repeat my question. What do you plan to do about it?"

"Well, the address on the manuscript was a box number in Catskill. That's a two-hour drive up the Hudson. I thought I might go up there tomorrow morning, arriving before the post office closes at noon. Do you want to come along?"

"A drive in the country is tempting," he admitted. "The dust of old books is thick in my throat these days."

At home that night I invited my wife Shelly to join us. But with the passing years she's taken an increasing dislike to Simon and, as I expected, she refused. "One of these days he's going to get you killed on one of these foolish expeditions," she predicted.

"This one was my idea," I pointed out.

"It's about that man who jumped from your window, isn't it?"

"Yes," I admitted. "I can't just let it rest, Shelly."

She sighed and said simply, "Try to be careful."

After living with me for twenty-six years she knew there was nothing more she could say.

It was a fine warm Saturday in early June, a perfect day for our journey up the Hudson. Simon had shed his traditional black garb for grey slacks and a dark-blue jacket. It wasn't much of an improvement but it helped. Though he often claimed to be two thousand years old, on that day he would have passed for a reasonably vigorous seventy-five.

"What do you expect to find here?" he asked as we pulled up in front of the post office.

"Cross didn't drive all this way to pick up his mail. If he had a box here it means he lived near here—at least part of the time. The police

might be willing to dismiss this whole business, but I'm not. After all, he jumped out of my window."

Luckily I'd remembered the box number correctly. The postal clerk checked his records and informed me, "We have notice that Harvey Cross is recently deceased."

"That's correct. What's being done with his mail?"

"His sister discontinued the box and instructed us to forward the mail directly to her. I guess he used to live with her."

"Here in Catskill?" The newspaper had mentioned no sister, anywhere.

"Not far from here. A town called Olympus. It's over toward the mountains about fifteen miles. I suppose that's how it got its name, though there's no Mount Olympus there."

I showed him my business card. "Look, it's important I contact Cross's sister about a manuscript he submitted to us. I need her address."

He thought it over and replied, "I suppose I could give you that. It's Hazel Phoenix, Hillside Road, Olympus."

I wrote it down and thanked him. Back in the car I told Simon what I'd learned. "It's not far. Let's drive over and see the sister. Maybe she can tell us something about the dead man."

"By all means," he agreed, and for the first time I detected a glimmer of interest in his eyes.

"I'm afraid there won't be any devils for you to chase," I said.

"Don't be too sure, my friend. At Olympus we may find gods, and where there are gods there could be devils as well."

It took us some time to find the home of Hazel Phoenix. As its name implied, Hillside Road ran along the side of a hill. The area was on the northeastern rim of the Catskills, and although the hills weren't as steep as those we could see in the distance they were still formidable.

The house sat back some distance from the road, almost hidden among the trees. It might have been the forest Harvey Cross said he'd written about. I wondered if he'd written the book while living in this house.

We parked at the end of the long driveway and had a closer look at the place. It was a small house that had been added onto in a seemingly haphazard manner. The overall impression was as if the original structure had sprouted wings—or tentacles—to spread itself over the surrounding landscape. "The gingerbread house gone wild," Simon commented.

At first no one answered the big brass knocker, but as we were about

to turn away we heard the sound of a power saw from somewhere behind the house. We walked around back, past a cinder-block garage, and found a slim young woman cutting through some small logs.

"That's hard work for a woman," I said, regretting the chauvinistic greeting almost at once.

She turned off the saw and eyed us uncertainly. "What can I do for you?"

"We're looking for Hazel Phoenix."

"You've found her." She set down the saw and wiped her hands on the legs of her jeans. I introduced Simon and myself and she shook hands, though I thought her eyes hardened at the mention of my name.

"Mrs. Phoenix, we came about your brother, Harvey Cross."

"Yes?"

"You may have recognized my name. It was my office he jumped from."

"Yes, I know." Her expression didn't change. She was a fairly attractive woman, around thirty, with the sort of face I wanted to see break out in a smile. But I wasn't giving her anything to smile about.

"Before he died, Harvey brought me the manuscript of a novel he'd written. It was called *The Unicorn's Daughter*. Unfortunately, the manuscript was mislaid during the confusion following his death. I'm sure it'll turn up, but in the meantime I wonder if you might have a carbon copy of it I could read. I feel I owe it to your brother."

She rolled the sleeves of her shirt higher on her slim arms and squinted at me in the sunlight. "It seems to me you owe him a lot more than that, mister. It seems to me you're responsible for his suicide."

"No, I assure you I'm not. We'd only just begun to talk. Nothing much had been said, and certainly nothing to cause his sudden decision to jump out the window."

"Well, I know nothing about his manuscript."

"Did he work on it while he was living here?"

"Who told you he lived here?" she asked sharply.

"The man at the post office mentioned it. He gave me your address."

"Well, he misunderstood. My brother lived in New York. He came here only occasionally for a visit."

"I see. Do you live here with your husband?"

"I'm not married."

"Oh. I thought, since your name was different from your brother's—"

"I'm not married," she repeated, offering no further explanation, and bent to pick up the power saw.

"Thank you for your help, Miss Phoenix," I muttered, and we turned away.

"Odd sort," Simon commented as we walked back to the car.

"That's for sure."

"Did you notice the names on the mailbox out by the road?"

"No," I admitted.

"Take a look."

I did and saw there were two names printed on a small piece of paper which had been taped to the box. A. GRIFFIN and H. PHOENIX. "So she's living here with some guy," I said as we got in the car.

"Perhaps."

"Or some girl."

"Are you in a hurry to get back, my friend?"

"Not especially."

"This case, if we could call it that, interests me. I'd like to drive around the neighborhood and ask a few questions."

"About Harvey Cross?"

"No, about A. Griffin and Hazel Phoenix."

There were no close neighbors along Hillside Road, and when we finally stopped at a house nearly a mile away an elderly couple there professed to know nothing about their distant neighbors. We had better luck at a small grocery store at the next crossroads. It was called Buraq's Country Store and the owner, Sam Buraq, a stocky man in his thirties, with a short beard, talked to us.

"Hazel Phoenix? Sure, she shops here. Lives there alone most of the time, but this fellow Griffin comes up and spends the weekends. I guess he works in New York and doesn't want to make that two-hour drive every night."

"What's he like?" I asked.

"About her age, I guess. Early thirties. Quiet fellow. Some sort of artist, I think."

"If he comes up on weekends he should be here today," I pointed out.

"He is. I seen him drive past not ten minutes ago. Had somebody with him in the car, but I didn't see who it was."

"What kind of car?"

"A blue Ford, the one he always drives. He was headin' up toward the house. If you came that way you must have passed him."

I thanked him and we went back to my car. "What do you think, Simon? Should we try Hazel Phoenix one more time?"

"It might prove interesting," he agreed. "This is interesting country."

We were about halfway back along the road when I spotted the blue Ford parked on the shoulder. It was empty. I pulled up just ahead of it and we got out. "Where could they have gone from here?" I said. "There's nothing but woods."

"Let's take a look," Simon suggested.

We walked a few feet into the woods and were enveloped by twilight. It was an eerie, silent place and I wanted to turn back at once. "Maybe he's in here with some girl," I said.

"Quiet," Simon cautioned, raising his hand. "Do you hear something?"

There was a breaking of the underbrush somewhere nearby, as if someone was running through the woods. We paused, frozen in our tracks, as the sound grew nearer. Then suddenly we saw a man crash into view ahead of us. His face and chest were covered with blood, and for an instant I didn't recognize him, but he seemed to know me. "God, Simon!"

"Quickly! He needs help!"

The man had collapsed on the ground. He reached out a trembling hand and spoke my name.

Then I saw it was Ash Gregory, the artist from my office.

"Ash, what happened? What are you doing here?"

He was trying to speak, but there was blood in his mouth. "Took—took manuscript from your office. Had to know—"

"Cross's manuscript? *You* took it?"

He nodded. "They—all—wanted it."

I could see now he'd been stabbed several times about the face and chest. "Who did this to you?"

"I—she—unicorn's daughter—help her."

"Why did Cross kill himself?"

"Because she—"

But that was all he said before he died there in the forest, a long way from Manhattan.

Simon and I looked quickly through his car before going for the police. There was no sign of Cross's manuscript. The killer might have taken it.

But there was also a good chance it was back in New York. If so, we had to find it.

When the local police arrived we told them as little as possible. I didn't want to be held up there all day and we didn't know very much anyway. They seemed to attribute the killing to some hitchhiker Gregory had picked up and put out an alarm to watch for hitchhikers in the area. But one of the local police, a sheriff's deputy named Toby Chimera, thought it an odd coincidence that I'd traveled all this distance to find the body of a man I worked with in Manhattan.

I thought it an odd coincidence too, and I tried to explain it away with a lie. "I recognized his car," I said. "He'd told me he sometimes drove up this way on weekends, so when I saw the car pulled off the road I thought he might be in some sort of trouble and I pulled off too."

"Still seems to be quite a coincidence," Chimera said, scratching his cheek. "We'll probably want to talk with you again. And you too, Mr. Ark."

"I'm available," Simon informed him. And then he said an odd thing. "Mr. Chimera, you know this part of the state. Are there many goats in the area? And snakes?"

"Well, sure—some of the farmers raise goats. And the Catskills are full of snakes."

"But no lions, I imagine."

The deputy's face hardened suddenly. "No, no lions." He left us and walked back to his car.

"What was that all about?" I asked Simon.

"This is a strange area. I was only trying to establish exactly how strange."

"Strange enough to have goats and snakes, but not lions?"

"I'll explain later."

When we got back to Manhattan I discovered I didn't know Ash Gregory's address, and there were too many A. Gregory listings in the phone book. I wasn't even sure he lived in Manhattan. I tried phoning my secretary Irene but it was already Saturday evening and when she didn't answer I figured she was out with her boy friend and I tried Martha Scane from publicity.

She was surprised to hear my voice and I told her as quickly as possible the tragic news about Ash Gregory. "I can't believe it!" she said, her voice breaking. "Not Ash!"

"I'm sorry I had to tell you like this, Martha. I know you were a friend of his and that's why I called. I need to know his address."

"He lived down in Greenwich Village," she replied, and gave me the address on Christopher Street. "Do the police have any idea who killed him?"

"They think it might have been a hitchhiker. If I hear anything more I'll let you know."

"He lived in the Village," I told Simon. "Let's get going."

"Do you plan on breaking and entering?" he asked with a slight smile.

"I plan on finding that manuscript, if it's there to be found."

We parked on the street about a block away from the address Martha had given me. It was eight o'clock, but not yet dark, as we mounted the steps and I rang the bell under A. Gregory's name. When no one answered we entered the vestibule through the unlocked door and moved down the dim hallway to his apartment at the rear of the first floor. I don't know how I intended to get in but that problem was solved when we saw that the lock had been forced and the wood around it splintered.

"Hardly the sort of thing the police would do," Simon whispered.

I pushed the door open cautiously and at once we heard the muffled sounds of a search in progress. Drawers were being pulled open and papers were being rifled. We must have made some slight noise because suddenly the sounds ceased and a figure in black appeared in a doorway across the living room from us.

As the figure moved, so did I, springing forward to grab one leg as it darted toward a window. We went down together with a thud and then I saw that my captive was a woman.

"What are you doing here?" I demanded.

She sat up, rubbing her shoulder where she'd hit the floor, and I had my first real look at her. She appeared to be in her thirties, and she had long black hair and brown eyes. The black slacks and sweater gave her the appearance of a sneak thief, but her face seemed open and almost innocent. "I might ask you the same thing," she countered, shifting her gaze to Simon in the doorway. "Are you police?"

"No. I worked with Ash. We found him today just before he died."

That didn't surprise her. She'd known he was dead. "I came here to collect some things of mine," she said. "My name's Kate Talos. Ash was a friend."

"How'd you know he was dead?"

"I heard it on the news."

It was possible, but I couldn't immediately check it. While I questioned her, Simon peered at the paintings on the walls. "He had a great interest in mythology," he observed.

"He painted those himself," Kate Talos said, getting to her feet and brushing herself off. I switched on the light in order to see them better.

There were seven paintings in all, and I recognized Ash's distinctive style from the jacket illustrations he'd done for some of our books. One showed a man of brass guarding an island, another a unicorn with a small naked girl at its side. There was a great bird, its wings spread wide, rising from smoldering ashes, and another winged creature with a lion's body. One painting showed a beast that seemed to have a fire-breathing lion's head, the body of a sheep or goat, and a serpent's tail. There was a dragon too. And the final painting showed a winged horse with the face of a woman and a peacock's tail. Studying them, I began to wonder how well I'd really known Ash Gregory.

"We may not need Harvey Cross's manuscript," Simon said. "These may tell us what we want to know. What do you think, Miss Talos?"

"I don't know what you're talking about. I don't know anything about a manuscript."

"Where is the child, Miss Talos?"

"What child?"

"The unicorn's daughter. The one in that painting."

"The painting was just his imagination."

"I don't think so." Simon took a step toward her. "Two of the seven are already dead, aren't they? Do you want more to die? Do you want the child to die?"

"No one would harm her," she blurted out, and then tried to backtrack. "If this child you speak of even exists."

"You're playing a dangerous game, Miss Talos. Who sent you here to search for the manuscript?"

"No one." She was defiant once more. "I'm leaving now. Don't try to stop me."

"Only your conscience will stop you, and I pray that it does. Otherwise, the death of that child could be on your head."

She hurried out the door, running from Simon and me, and maybe from herself.

"What was that all about?" I asked him.

"Only she can tell us. I hope she will."

"And the manuscript?"

"Is here in this apartment, most likely. If the killer had removed it from Gregory's body Kate Talos wouldn't have been here searching for it."

We took up the search where she had abandoned it, but found nothing. Two hours later I was about to give it up. "Simon, it's only a matter of time before the Olympus police contact the New York police and ask them to check this place. If we're here when they arrive they'll think we broke in the door."

"Yes, it's odd the police haven't turned up before this." He had that knowing look on his face that often infuriates me. "It's almost as if they were being kept away until the apartment could be searched."

"Well, she searched it and we've searched it. There's no manuscript here," I said.

"Don't be too sure."

"It was about an inch and a half thick, Simon—a good three hundred and fifty pages. There's nowhere it could be hidden we haven't looked."

He stood in the center of the room, gazing around. "Your mistake, my friend, is in regarding it as a complete unit, like a book. Think of it as three hundred fifty separate pages."

"What?"

He strode to the closest of the seven paintings and lifted it from the wall. There, taped to the back of the painting, was a thickness of type-written sheets. "You see? Divide it into seven parts, tape it to the backs of these paintings, and each part becomes less than a quarter-inch thick—hardly noticable with the thickness of these frames."

"How did you know?"

"Because the paintings are the key to everything. They became the logical hiding place when the rest of the apartment turned up nothing."

We quickly assembled the manuscript and Simon sat down at the kitchen table to read it. "What about the police?" I asked.

"They won't be coming. We're safe here."

"How do you know?"

But he didn't answer. He was already engrossed in the book. I joined him and tried reading some of it, but my eyelids soon grew heavy. Harvey

Cross had not been a great prose stylist, and the world of literature, at least, had lost nothing by his untimely death.

Simon read through the night while I dozed on the couch. When he roused me it was near dawn, but he seemed as fresh as if he'd just awakened. "How was it, Simon?" I asked. "As bad as the first twenty pages?"

"It had a story to tell."

"The girl living in the forest has already been done," I reminded him, "in *Green Mansions*."

"But this girl is only a child of seven, and a flashback later in the manuscript tells how she came to be there."

"I know. She's the unicorn's daughter."

He started to speak, but a noise at the door distracted him. Moving quickly across the room, he yanked it open and Kate Talos all but fell in. She took a deep breath and said, "I came back."

"At five in the morning?" Simon said. "For another look for the manuscript?"

"No. I was hoping you might still be here. I want to take you to her."

"The child?"

She nodded. "If it's not too late."

"Do you think it might be?"

"As you pointed out, two people have died already. I've been awake all night thinking about that."

I had to interrupt. "Will one of you please tell me what's going on?"

"There will be time for that on the road," Simon said. "We're driving back to Olympus."

The Sunday-morning traffic along the Hudson seemed surprisingly light until I remembered it was not yet seven o'clock. As I drove, Simon and Kate Talos talked.

"How did you know there were seven?" she asked Simon.

"Because Gregory had done seven paintings. I recognized several of the names, of course, and it was not difficult to connect each name with its painting. It was reasonable to assume there were seven of you in all."

"And the child?"

"It was painted realistically in the portrait of the unicorn, not symbolized as the rest of you were. That told me there was a real child, and it

also told me the subject of Harvey Cross's manuscript was more truth than fiction."

I saw her nod in the rearview mirror. "Ash loved the child. He had to portray her as she really was."

"Would somebody please tell me what this is all about?" I asked.

"The story begins a long time ago," Simon replied, "more than ten years ago, in that era of war protests and alternate lifestyles and the heavy use of drugs by the counterculture. Harvey Cross's manuscript tells all about it. Seven people—four men and three women—went to live in a commune in the Catskills. They adopted the names of mythical creatures, perhaps because the commune was located near the village of Olympus and somehow they imagined themselves to be like those ancient Greek gods. But over the years there was a falling-out. One man left the commune completely and was cursed by some who remained. A woman bore a child by one of the other men and decided it should run wild in the woods and grow up as a free creature. The commune members fed the little girl, but there was no thought of sending her to school or allowing her to mingle with other children."

"The unicorn's daughter," I said.

"Exactly. Harvey Cross was the one who left the commune, but he kept his ties with at least one member. You, Miss Talos?"

"Yes," she admitted. "I did see Harvey after he left. We all did, really, except for Unicorn. Occasionally Harvey even went back and stayed at the house with Phoenix, but never when Griffin was there on weekends. He was afraid of Griffin, because of the child."

"Griffin was the child's father?"

"Yes. Isn't that in the manuscript?"

"Not in so many words, but it seemed likely."

"Would you mind telling me who this Griffin is?" I asked.

"That should be obvious, my friend. The name on the mailbox in Olympus was A. *Griffin*, just as the name on that apartment was A. *Gregory*. And the portrait of the little girl was so lovingly detailed it seemed more likely to be the painter's daughter than someone else's daughter. Griffin and Gregory were the same person. That's why he appeared in Olympus only on weekends—because he was employed at Neptune Books during the week. The identification shouldn't surprise you, since Mr. Buraq at the store told us Griffin had passed by in his blue Ford—the car Gregory was driving."

The girl seemed surprised. "So you know Buraq too."

"Oh, yes. We know almost all of them." And he said to me, "Some of the seven adopted their mythical names for permanent use. Others, like Unicorn and Griffin and Dragon, found the names more suitable within the confines of the commune. Back in the city they kept their own names."

"What are the names?" I'd been so interested in the conversation that I hadn't realized we'd almost reached our destination. It was not yet eight o'clock.

"The seven creatures portrayed in Gregory's paintings. The bird rising from the ashes signified Hazel Phoenix. The man of brass guarding the island of Crete was Miss Talos here. Ash Gregory was Griffin, the winged creature with the lion's body. Sam Buraq, at the store where we stopped, was an Islamic beast, the winged horse with the face of a woman and a peacock's tail. I think by process of elimination we can conclude that Harvey Cross was Dragon before he deserted the commune and started writing his book. As for the remaining two—"

"There are cars at the house," Kate Talos said, pointing ahead of us.

"That is good," Simon Ark decided. "The commune is assembled for the last act."

"They won't let you take the child," Kate warned.

"We'll see."

Simon led the way to the door of the gingerbread house while Kate Talos and I trailed along. They must have seen our approach, because Hazel Phoenix greeted us and said, "Well, Kate—another traitor in our midst?"

"He found the manuscript, Hazel. He knows all about it. I didn't have to tell him a thing."

We stepped into the living room and I saw Sam Buraq sitting in a chair. The curtains blocking the adjoining room stirred and another man stepped in, holding a revolver in his hand. I recognized Toby Chimera, the sheriff's deputy we'd met the previous day.

"Thank God, you're here, Sheriff," I began. "These people are—"

"My friend," said Simon, "Mr. Chimera knows who these people are. Mr. Chimera is one of them."

"What?"

"Chimera—the fire-breathing monster with a lion's head, the body of a goat, and the tail of a serpent. Don't you remember my asking him about those creatures yesterday? The New York police never came to

Gregory's apartment last night because Chimera delayed notifying them of the murder until Miss Talos had time to search for the manuscript."

"You know a great deal," Chimera said. "Too much."

"We came for the child," Simon told him. "You can't leave her to grow up in the woods like some sort of animal."

"That's none of your business," Hazel Phoenix told him.

"It's everyone's business. It's the law's business when two people are killed."

"Cross committed suicide," Sam Buraq reminded us.

"But Ash Gregory didn't. He was murdered because he'd finally seen the light and decided to rescue his daughter."

I was standing near the window looking out on the back yard that ran down to the woods and thought I saw a movement at their edge. "The law will deal with Gregory's murder," Chimera was saying.

"As a man of the law you must make a choice, Mr. Chimera," Simon told him. "You must serve your friends *or* uphold the law—you cannot do both. You can no longer cover up what goes on here. None of you are gods and you never were. Perhaps in truth you are more like the beasts whose names you bear." He turned to Phoenix. "The war is over now and the revolution never happened. It's time to come home with the rest of us."

Her face hardened as she stared at Simon. "Shoot him, Toby," she said.

"Simon! There's a child in the woods!" My shout brought them running to the window in time to see a little girl in raggedy clothing vanish into the underbrush.

"We must hurry," Simon Ark urged, "before she gets away."

I didn't know if a bullet might stop us, but they let us go.

Simon didn't move fast and by the time we reached the edge of the woods the child was gone from sight. We went further in, searching for her. "We'll never find her," I said after a few minutes.

"Yes, we will. She's not afraid of people. Cross's manuscript said she liked strangers."

We hurried on into the deepest part of the forest until at last we came to a little clearing by a brook. And then we saw her, playing down by the water. The unicorn's daughter.

"Six of them, Simon. The four in the house and the two that are dead. We never got to the seventh. We never got to Unicorn."

The little girl turned at the sound of my voice and smiled up at us. "Who are you?" she asked. "Are you the wise Wufniks from the desert lands?"

"We are your new friends," Simon told her, kneeling in the grass by her side. "We have come to take you away with us."

"No, you won't!" a voice behind us said.

We turned and I saw the woman who stood at the edge of the woods, clad in jeans and a shirt. Though I'd never seen her in anything but her office dresses, I recognized Martha Scane at once.

Her head was down, sighting along the barrel of the shotgun pointed at us. At that angle it might almost have been a unicorn's horn protruding from her forehead.

"Get away from them, Lilith!" she shouted to the child, and the little girl obeyed instantly, running for cover in the woods.

"Martha—" I started to say.

She fired once, and the blast from the shotgun thudded into the ground near Simon. I saw little specks of blood appear on his hand.

Her second shot came like an echo of the first, almost drowning out the simultaneous crack of a revolver. But this shot was wide to the left, and then I saw the blood on Martha Scane's shirt.

She fell on her face in the soft grass, still clutching the shotgun.

Toby Chimera came out of the woods holding his service revolver. I saw that he was crying as he walked to her body, but I knew he had made his choice at last.

It was much later that day when Simon and I finally drove back to New York. The little girl, Lilith, would find foster parents to care for her and the four we'd left at the house would go their own ways when the investigation was completed.

"She did it all for the child," Simon explained as we drove. "In some misguided way she thought she was protecting Lilith from the world. She'd threatened to destroy Harvey Cross many times before, and when he heard her voice come over that intercom in your office he must have thought she was a true demon. He'd never known where she or Ash worked, you see, and he'd unwittingly brought his manuscript to the very publisher who employed her. It must have been an overwhelming rush of sheer despair that made him leap through your window to his death."

"And his death brought matters to a head."

Simon nodded. "Ash Gregory began to realize that his daughter had to be removed from the commune. She wasn't a goddess—only a child. He and Martha must have argued about it driving up yesterday. She got him to stop the car—perhaps by pretending to see Lilith in the woods—and then stabbed him to death. She had to keep the child at all costs, to raise her as a daughter of nature."

"And you knew it was Martha all along?"

"The way you described the event to me, only her voice on the intercom could have affected Harvey Cross so quickly. And doesn't it seem reasonable that if Gregory was the child's father, then the mother—and Gregory's killer—who was driving up with him from New York might be someone who worked with him during the week?"

"I can't believe the coincidence that brought Cross to the same publisher where they worked," I said. It was early evening now, and the lights of Manhattan were coming into view across the Hudson.

"Oh, it was no coincidence, my friend. Harvey Cross was lured to your office by the same conscious urge that brought Martha Scane and Ash Gregory there as employees in the first place. Don't you see it yet? These seven people believed in the old Roman and Greek gods. They established their commune in a place called Olympus and took the names of mythical creatures. It was not coincidence but a logical choice that brought them to a publisher named Neptune Books."





CRIME ON SCREEN

by Peter Christian

Philo *who*? By now, nearly two generations of mystery readers may have grown up without making the acquaintance of Philo Vance, but from the late 1920's through the 1930's he was the most popular detective in American fiction. It was because of the novels by S. S. Van Dine (the pseudonym of art critic and editor Willard Huntington Wright) about aristocratic amateur sleuth Philo Vance that detective-story reading suddenly became both respectable and in vogue; such was the rage Van Dine created that an ice cream sundae was even named after one of his books. Philo made his impact on the mystery screen as well: one of the films closely adapted from a Van Dine novel, *The Kennel Murder Case*, is perhaps the finest detective movie of its day.

On screen, Vance's character ranged from urbane criminologist to tough private eye—an interesting transition showing how our heroes are reshaped by the times through which they pass (and, in the case of Vance, sometimes topple from the heights of popularity and are forgotten)—but the Philo Vance we meet in the pages of Van Dine's books is far from warm and lovable. A Nietzschean aesthete, often bored and superior-seeming, he deserved Ogden Nash's humorous couplet about him: "Philo Vance/ Needs a kick in the pance." The sophisticated overtones which surely contributed to the novels' popularity (they were instant bestsellers) were toned down in their translation to the screen, however. Paramount had bought rights to several of the books, and after some indecision they cast William Powell, a contract player previously featured in a series of oily, villainous parts, as the detective. It was such a change of pace for

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the actor that even the *New York Times* noted that this was "the first chance Mr. Powell has had in years to appear in a sympathetic role." And Powell brought it off well, at his own insistence softening Vance's character and curbing much of his irritating superciliousness.

The Canary Murder Case (1929) concerned itself with the death of a popular showgirl, strangled behind the locked doors of her dressing room, and used a novel method for its day to create a nearly perfect crime. An alluring Louise Brooks was cast as the murdered "canary," and Powell was given some very competent help: Eugene Pallette as gruff Sergeant Heath of Homicide and Etienne Girardot as the peppery police pathologist Dr. Doremus. This team assisted Powell through several subsequent films in the series.

Canary was so popular that Paramount immediately put into production *The Greene Murder Case* and released it the same year. While the first film had a theatrical and nightclub setting—nightclubs were a phenomenon of that decade—the Greene murders occur in the shadowy, claustrophobic confines of a city mansion. The eccentric Greene family, obsessed with hatred for one another, are being killed one by one, and Philo has a field day investigating their dour motives and nighttime passings. Van Dine liked to set his murders in the ancestral homes of old, decaying families; the Vance movies returned to this theme again and again.

Another studio released the next screen case. MGM, well aware of Philo's popularity, had been quicker than Paramount in securing the rights to *The Bishop Murder Case*, one of the most bizarre mysteries ever penned. Years before Agatha Christie used the device in *And Then There Were None*, an unknown maniac calling himself "The Bishop" is inspired by phrases in nursery rhymes while committing a series of apparently random murders. The killer shoots an arrow into the air, and pushes Humpty Dumpty off his wall, and leaves beside each of his victims a black bishop chess piece. To play *their* Philo Vance, MGM selected an earnest young Basil Rathbone—nine years before his electrifying Sherlock Holmes—and filmed the mystery against its actual New York settings. (The Cock Robin murder occurs in Central Park in broad daylight and is most effective.)

William Powell did one further Philo Vance feature for Paramount, *The Benson Murder Case* (1930), but the studio almost totally rewrote the plot of what was actually the first Van Dine novel. Benson is a hated

stockbroker who is shot at a moment when all the suspects appear to have perfect alibis. For two previous films serial killers had been tracked and the screen cluttered with corpses, but in this one Vance unexpectedly and thoughtfully investigated a single murder.

Vance's next case took him to a new studio, Warner's, who had picked up William Powell's contract and bought rights to *The Kennel Murder Case* (1933). Under Michael Curtiz's imaginative direction, a superlative detective film was fashioned, ranking high on anyone's select list of the motion picture's best mysteries.

Actually, *Kennel* differs little from previous investigations: again murders occur in a sinister old house to members of a strange and quarrelsome family. But Curtiz created the atmosphere with such zest and unravelled the intricate puzzle with such dazzling clarity (using flashbacks, floor plans, and scale models) that the film has been called the perfect screen whodunit.

It was, however, the last time Powell played Vance. The following year he used his considerable grace and charm in bringing Nick Charles to the screen. Warren Williams became Philo in *The Dragon Murder Case* (1934) in which a young member of another rich, eccentric family dives into a supposedly cursed pool on an ancestral estate and disappears beneath the dark waters. Such were Van Dine's powers of melodrama that we nearly believe in the possibility of a nocturnal dragon flying overhead, guardian of the pool, plucking out victims.

Paul Lukas, without bothering to explain his thick Hungarian accent, played Philo in *The Casino Murder Case* (1935). The chief concerns of that story were gambling and poison, the latter administered in a particularly cold-blooded, unusual way. Previous films had kept Vance free of romantic interest, as did the books, but at MGM he was allowed to be friendly with Rosalind Russell.

In 1936 MGM cast Edmund Lowe as a dashing, determined Vance in *The Garden Murder Case* but retained very little of the Van Dine book on which the film was supposedly based. Several people meet extraordinary deaths (falling off horses and double-decker busses) with no one else nearby. The final situation, by the way, in which a hypnotized Vance is about to drop from a high parapet was re-used by scriptwriter Bertram Millhauser nine years later when he wrote *Sherlock Holmes and the Woman in Green*.

A version of *The Scarab Murder Case* was done in England the same

year, with Wilfrid Hyde-White as star, and in 1937 *The Greene Murder Case* was redone by lesser hands and called *Night of Mystery*, with Grant Richards as a “transitional” Vance, smoking a pipe and behaving heartier.

The next film returned Vance to his old ways, but only as a foil for comedienne Gracie Allen—she calls him “Fido”—in *The Gracie Allen Murder Case* (1939). Written by Van Dine as a book for Paramount, and then changed somewhat when adapted by others for the screen, the film is not without a mystery framework but has long slapstick sequences in which a courtly Warren William (as Vance) is exasperated by the nitwitted Gracie, who stumbles into a nightclub murder. George Burns is nowhere to be seen.

After a dull remake of *The Kennel Murder Case* (*Calling Philo Vance*) in 1940, the detective faded from view. S. S. Van Dine had died the year before. But sparked by the postwar popularity of the private eye genre, a small studio called PRC decided to bring back a new, modern version of Philo—now tough and far from mannered, prowling alleys and whistling at girls. It was a radical change.

This workingman’s Vance flourished briefly, appearing in three films in 1947. *Philo Vance Returns* starred William Wright, looking into the murder of a playboy and nearly all of his six former wives (one met her death in a poisoned bubble bath). Alan Curtis played the detective—now a private investigator—in *Philo Vance’s Gamble* and *Philo Vance’s Secret Mission*, the latter with an amusing pulp magazine publishing setting. Then Vance vanished from the screen for good and all.

Although there have been a few attempts to revive interest in the Van Dine books—Gregg Press is bringing out all of them in library editions—there has been no thought of returning the detective to the screen. Despite Philo Vance’s impact on both fiction and film, despite his successes for several major Hollywood studios and his progress, cinematically, from epicene to two-fisted, one of the movies’ greatest detectives remains forgotten, irretrievably languishing in the past. A mystery, indeed.

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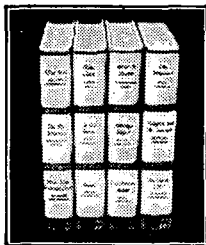
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